

Shipping & Handling

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
HAWAII AT MĀNOA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN ENGLISH

MAY 2018

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Abstract:

Shipping & Handling is a collection of poetry and short stories exploring legacies: the ones we inherit, the ones we leave, and the space between. It examines our attempts to claim identities by reclaiming the space once occupied by those before us. Though primarily based in Hawai'i (from the 1940s to present day), regular "commuting" to and from Samoa (and its culture, sensibilities, even some language) plays a prominent role throughout this collection. The pieces mimic a movement between and within generations, traveling through remembrance, language and family to weave together those ancient bonds, dust off the residue of occupation, and reinforce a collective identity to bear the weight of a post-colonial reality. Shipping & Handling celebrates the beauty in the fantastic and the mundane that is the space we occupy.

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“No permanence is ours; we are a wave
That flows to fit whatever form it finds:
Through night or day, cathedral or the cave
We pass forever, craving form that binds.”

— Hermann Hesse

Introduction

My mother made sure there were always opportunities to read – a large shelf of picture books and childrens' stories on the lower shelves, novels and miscellaneous grown-up books above, all squeezed between family pictures, credit union anniversary steins stuffed with assorted pens, and a glossy-spined, outdated World Book collection. We subscribed to both the Advertiser and the Star-Bulletin, so there were always folded sections of the paper curved over the arm of the Lazy Boy or folded at the base of the lamp on the end table. For some of my friends, newspapers were simply a nuisance stacked in the garage to be stripped and crumpled for the hibachi, or hastily spread to line bird or rabbit cages; but I liked the efficiency of space and the economy of word. I enjoyed snapping it open and feeling mature, like a corner office boss with his feet on the desk, or a barber lounging in between customers. There were faded yellow vertebrae of old National Geographics stuffed so tightly on the bottom rack that I got finger cramps trying to pry a few out of the middle just to release the horizontal pressure.

But reading was not limited to traditional means. Maps not only provided a way for words and art could converge, but also the subconscious template on which to practice retracing pathways of malaga (travel). Maps told stories, but also cleared a space to create my own. My young fingers slid across the sheeny face of my globe, drawing triangles over the smooth bumps: Hawai'i-Samoa-Massachusetts; Massachusetts-Ireland-Hawai'i; Hawai'i-Tahiti-Aotearoa; and so on. I was the only kid in first grade who could name and locate most countries in Oceania, feeding the desire to read more maps. Political maps unfolded in lively patterns of color in front of me like a grandma-made quilt; yet, the arbitrary nature of its organization was puzzling, especially in the American West. I could crease a straight line with my fingernail along the borders from Nevada to Missouri. It seemed

unnatural. As young as I was, I still understood that most things in the real world were not straight. Which is why the renderings of physical maps felt more authentic. They resembled our back yard after we finally moved the junk in the corner and coiled up the hose left out for weeks: splotches of yellow and brown fringed with deep green – stories of what might have happened, of what was there before.

Often, malaga can be an internal, personal exchange. For some, it is numbers or sound or color that speak to them; for me, words have always clicked. My siblings were often unwitting travelers accompanying me on my malaga. Most mornings, we would wall ourselves off from each other with cereal boxes. We'd eventually get bored of staring at Mary Lou Retton or Carl Lewis on the cover and flip it around to read details of entering a Scooby Doo sweepstakes, or learn about the free Star Wars stickers or Muppets magazine inside (FREE! INSIDE!). By the second bowl, we were on to the sides of the boxes, learning big, cool words that were fun to say from the nutrient charts, like Potassium, Niacin, Riboflavin. How-to manuals, recipes, medicine bottles (Amoxicillin, Azithromycin, Albuterol – and that's just the A's) kept the fun going. Even swiping aside errant flour to read the next step in the pie crust directions from my grandma's tattered cookbook had a mystery to it, like I was Indiana Jones – running my fingertips across the page, decrypting a secret message carved in archaic symbols.

Innovation in technology presented even more modalities of vā (social space) between which to commute. As a younger child, stories could be found by pulling on the television power lever and clicking the knob around the dial (channels 2, 4, 9, 11), making sure the antenna was pointed toward the window. I came of age during the advent of cable television. Now there were dozens of choices to click on the dial (located now on an entirely separate box from the TV), including the silly idea of having a channel with all news, all the time. My parents forced my brother and I to have chicken pox together, so we enjoyed two weeks of game shows and soap operas: Card Sharks, Pyramid, Tic-Tac-Dough; Days of Our Lives, Another

World, Santa Barbara – one after another. I learned how hosts crafted personas, how soaps convoluted narratives, how otherwise meaningless staged events could

be so riveting. *Taxi* and *Cheers* taught me comedic timing. *Hill Street Blues* showed me how characterization is the real story behind the car chases and the stick-em-ups.

Though books served as *va'a* for me from a young age, and voyaging to the glistening shores of television constantly beckoned, music was the world of stories I inhabited most. I'd sprawl out on the living room carpet with album covers spread around me and immerse myself in lyrics and liner notes. *Off the Wall*, Anne Murray, Mozart, Earth Wind & Fire, Hui 'Ohana – the genre was not as important as the anticipation of putting needle to wax, waiting anxiously through the gravelly crunch and pop on vinyl of grooved blemish and dust for sound to flood the room. Even the cover art painted stories to decipher (What jokes was Gabby telling while shooting the Rabbit Island Music Festival cover? Why do Lionel Richie, Luther Vandross, AND Michael Jackson all have cover shots featuring them lying on their sides, propped up on their elbow?), so when MTV put this cover art in motion, storytelling turned the page for me. Music videos converted the musical experience into a visual medium in a way that video footage of concerts did not. It was a melding of two storytelling art forms – TV/film and music – that captured my imagination. A-ha's "Take On Me" video told the story via pencil sketch. Peter Gabriel's "Sledgehammer" was an exhilarating explosion of claymation and stop motion. "Thriller" simply blew the roof off of the whole music video medium, and showed me that stories can be told in ways I had never imagined.

Journeying across *vā* is rarely an individual endeavor. Ancient Hawaiians used *kilo* to interpret signs in nature and *ho'okele* to read stars and direct sails. I have always held songwriters of any genre in high regard, because they have to tell a story using words as well as sound. When it

comes to lyricism, however, nothing has shaped my development as a curator of words more than rap. When I first heard Melle Mel complain about the broken glass and piss-drenched stairwells of public housing signifying the depravity of a dysfunctional social system, I knew that this particular act of arranging and delivering words would become a lifelong undertaking. What was so captivating initially was the sheer volume of words performed in such a short space and time. Hearing him rattle off the speaker's grievances and describe the bleakness of his reality cut through the fluff and cheese of pop music. There was a story was being told – a real story about a real place and real people – and that was powerful. This is not to say these stories reside only in late 70s New York rap; quite the contrary. To this day, I can hear Country Comfort lamenting beaches being sold for hotel development while driving on the very highways the Makaha Sons of Ni'ihau, when imagining the reaction of returning Hawaiian royalty, bemoan. Whether they be from the Bronx or the beach, the lyrics held significance as story, taking root early in my development as a writer. From there, it was an obsession. Rap has been around since man could speak – long before Greek rhapsodes and traveling bards. Hearing the Sugar Hill Gang's Wonder Mike rap-scatting the opening lines of "Rapper's Delight" made sense, reminding me of Ella Fitzgerald on one of the old records spread out on the living room carpet. Thirty-five years later, all the lessons gleaned from listening – on breath, pace, cadence, beat, syncopation, enunciation, accent, stress, tone, conflict, vocal variation, rhyme, figurative language, articulation of thought, wit, humor – they all remain.

Those who go before often groove lines through which those who follow track. Similarly, influences can serve as teachers, guides, amiable companions for those crossing the "betweenness." My writing influences are intertwined with my teaching influences, as my pursuit of both endeavors started together. The inspiration from one such figure has stood the test of time, remaining with me across decades: German author Hermann Hesse. Influences often arise and take

hold in times when we are most impressionable. At the dawn of my teaching (and coaching) career, I encountered the bulk of Hesse's work. Several of his most famous works, including *Siddhartha*, *Narcissus and Goldmund*, and *The Glass-Bead Game*, set learning as a central theme. In *Journey to the East*, Hesse crystallizes my idealized aim of teaching: "It seemed that, in time, all the substance from one image would flow into the other and only one would remain.... He must grow. I must disappear" (118). Beyond his balance of grace and efficiency of language (I wonder how beautiful the writing must be in German), he ranks as one of my favorite authors because so much of his work has a pedagogical thread woven into it. In *Narcissus and Goldmund*, Narcissus the teacher reflects on his efforts to guide his pupil, Goldmund: "For a long time he had apparently labored in vain to awaken him, to teach him the language in which the secret could be told" (271). This line resonates with me not only in how I approach my teaching, but also how I think about language, writing and the art of conveying (and receiving) thought.

Influence can also be attributed to a commonality of experience and an identification of self with another within that shared history, which is why I connect with Craig Santos Perez's work. There are certain techniques he employs effectively that I feel could be applied in my own work; specifically, his use of government documents to highlight the rampant hypocrisies of military occupation under an extended colonial imposition. In his piece "*ginen ta(la)ya*" from his 2014 collection *from Unincorporated Territory [guma']*, Perez uses what reads as Iraq War death notices of indigenous soldiers from Guahñan and the surrounding region, but with a twist: ~~"U.S. Army Spe. Jonathan Pangelinan Santos, a former Santa Rita resident, was killed in Iraq, when his vehicle hit a land mine. He was 22~~ (32). With the use of cross-through, Perez's approach has an illumination-by-redaction effect, wherein the specialist's name is initially the focus. This lends weight to the name, and thereby the person, who has been killed. Being the last of six notices in this section of the poem,

though, the subsequent effect becomes one of defining who he was in terms of the U.S. military, not as an indigenous son of Guahån. Inevitably the cross-through is where our eyes focus, and the lines serve as a form of negating his self and reducing Santos to a two-dimensional statistic. Perez juxtaposes this with his grandfather's recounting of events from WWII and the abuses he suffered at the hands of Japanese Imperial soldiers: "They force him and others to build the airstrip in Barrigada... "Their bayonets in our backs" (33). The result is a poignant and haunting realization that the military-colonial disruption Chamorros endured is multi-generational and multi-pronged, with lasting repercussions from both Japanese and U.S. occupation.

The more I studied his work, to more I recognized thematic similarities with my own. Guam and American Samoa have the two highest per capita rates of enlistment in U.S. armed forces of any state or territory. Both places share the residual ill-effects of prolonged U.S. military exploitation and occupation, and in many situations, enlisting is viewed as one of the only viable "ways out" for young, indigenous men, for whom there are very few employment and educational opportunities. In *from Unincorporated Territory [saina]*, Perez acknowledges the ghosts of what remains: "I don't remember who told me that the reef around guahån is / made of our bones—burial / in every wave—" (59). Both places share high rates of its people who suffer from critical health implications – where diets have been perverted by high-sodium, high-sugar, fatty foods introduced by (and primarily produced in) the U.S. I, too, "have fond memories of those canned meat Sundays, my Indigenous Grandma, and her heroic efforts to make [us] believe [we] were the best fed children in all of Uncle's Empire" (48). This notion of gastro-colonialism and its long-lasting (often disastrous) adverse effects on indigenous populations is alive and well in Perez's poetry, and has a growing presence in my own. Perhaps what I have gleaned most from his work is the complicated process of how to rationalize, to synthesize, and then to weaponize these injustices, these incursions – not just for use as a form of

resistance but to shape my own sensibilities and inform how I should move forward in helping my own people.

Femalagaa'i i le Va o Nu'u ("commuting between villages"): Malaga, Vā and the Modalities of Movement

One of the aims of this creative project is to examine the confluence (and in some cases, collision) of Samoan settler narratives within US and Pasifika frameworks to show how applying the term "settler" to Samoan movement throughout the Pacific is problematic. The West's inaccurate assessment and cataloguing of Oceania's economic, cultural and social health leads to misconceptions of the place and its people. By misconstruing the movement of Oceanic peoples as diaspora or escape rather than seeing it as a natural collective mobility that is as necessary as blood circulating through the body, the West further misidentifies, misinforms and misdiagnoses the Oceanic condition. Tongan writer and anthropologist, Epeli Hau'ofa, agrees: "much of the welfare of ordinary people of Oceania depends on an informal movement along ancient routes drawn in bloodlines invisible to the enforcers of the laws of confinement and regulated mobility" (Hau'ofa 156). These routes were not simply lines on a map, but sea highways of commerce, communication, culture and conquest.

By shifting the lens through which Oceanic relocation is viewed – including using what Alice te Punga Somerville and Tony Ballantyne call the "horizontal modes of Indigenous-Indigenous connection" and "Indigenous 'movement and cultural traffic'" – we can more accurately view Polynesian malaga as it pertains to Intra-Pacific migration patterns: Polynesians as "oceanic commuters" within their own expanding web of surrogate villages, rather than permanent settlers in

foreign lands. Using Sa'ilemanu Lilomaiaava-Doktor's examination of Samoan malaga, we can extend and apply this interpretation to the greater Oceanic network:

Malaga metaphorically represents the different places Samoans live without inserting them into dichotomies such as rural/urban, Sāmoa/ America, or Sāmoa/New Zealand. Malaga situates individuals in the realm of their 'āiga. Irrespective of location, those who move are not perceived as "people of two worlds or people of no worlds" (Subedi 1993, 213), but as being simultaneously involved both i'inei (home, local) and fafo (overseas, abroad). Neither "home" nor "reach" are static places. I'inei and fafo meet and overlap in various places in the "diaspora" as contemporary population movements maintain the social space, vā, between people (Liloimaiava-Doktor 14).

How might this approach alter how Polynesian/Oceanian identity is interpreted (by both Oceanians and non-Oceanians) going forward?

Another aim is to recover the intimacies lost and acknowledge those gained in the relationships forged across these histories (e.g. religious indoctrination; intra-settler intermarriage). In doing so, strains of questioning arise, some of which include: What is spawned? What is left in the aftermath? How should settler narratives be categorized? Should not Polynesian movement within Polynesia (considered "resettlement" by western standards) be different, say, from that of a New England haole moving to Hawai'i? Should Samoan (Polynesian) movement within the Pacific (e.g. to Aotearoa and Australia) even be considered "settler," or is this movement simply carrying on the "series of complex and impressive ocean journeys...undertaken over the last five thousand years"? (Somerville). How might the Maori view the arriving Samoan, or the kanaka maoli view the arriving Polynesian (and more recently, Micronesian)? Do these examples differ because their political consequences differ?

It may appear that I use certain terms (e.g. "Samoan;" "Polynesian;" "Oceanic") concurrently, even interchangeably. My intention is not to diminish each through conflation. In keeping with Albert Wendt's commentary in the introduction to *Whetu Moana: Contemporary Polynesian Poems in English*, I use these terms to "reveal(s) an interconnected web of linguistic, thematic, and

worldviews. There is a commonality in our bubbling polyglot Polynesian diversity, the commonality of ocean, of a shared vocabulary, of our communal cultures and values, and our colonial experience. 'These are the forces that draw our poetry together' (Wendt 2). Just as the Samoan concept of malaga has a radiating and reverberating effect across space, I contend that these paradigms of thought are shared on a pan-Pasifika level. A next-step vision I have going forward is to explore the way in which terms like "malaga" can extend beyond prescribed boundaries like Pasifika and Oceania to become pan-nesian in scope: from the Aleutians to the Azores; Zakyntos to Zanzibar.

These Oceanic movements entail a constant series of crossing into and out of realms, both literal and figurative. The multiple phenomena of vā can be as intricate as they are fluid, further lending the word power and depth. To be sure, one of vā's primary definitions as a verb in the Samoan language is "to divide" or "separate" (Milner 307), but like most terms, context and application matter. As a noun, vā also means "relationship" and the "space between" (Milner 307), though not to be construed as a void, an abyss or absence, but, as Albert Wendt suggests, "the betweenness...space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All...giving meaning to things (which can) change as the relationships and the contexts change" (Wendt 402). In his novel *Sons for the Return Home*, Wendt further captures this notion by having his protagonist experiencing one of the many forms of occupying this betweenness: "he no longer felt any sensation of motion; it was as if the plane was now fixed forever in a placid timeless sea between his past and his future, and he had nothing to lose" (Wendt 216).

Vā is a space that is continually occupied. Arteries carry the oxygen that veins do not, but both are constantly pulsing blood, bound by a shared, symbiotic purpose. Historian Damon Salesa echoes this sentiment, that vā is "necessarily relational, implying not a static point of observation but a movement...between" (Salesa 42-43). From a Tongan perspective, Konai Helu Thaman speaks to

the parallel concept of tauhi vaha‘a as “a foundation for peace and intercultural understanding” (Lilomaiaava-Doktor 13), just as Hawaiian concepts of wā found in the kumulipo – which interweaves mo‘okū‘auhau (genealogy) with time and space – can operate in similar latitudes. These are critical discernments to make when seeking to understand the larger system of Oceanic connections. Through this lens, the practices and motivations of people moving between, within, across vā can be articulated further, leaving them less vulnerable to distortion and misrepresentation.

Vā’s basis in connectivity renders it transactional by nature, yet the myriad of interdependencies considered spans the Polynesian socio-cultural spectrum. Stretching well beyond the nuclear and extended familial models, vā relationships can be “(c)hief-orator, clergy-village, people-environment, or God-people” (Lilomaiaava-Doktor 14). Other forms can include: dominant-subordinate; seeing-not seeing; local-visitor; foreigner-indigenous; tama/teine-fa‘afafine (heteronormative-third gender); lagi-lalolagi (heaven-earth); fenua-vasa (land-sea); ancestor-descendent; dream state-reality. The extent to which these relationships can approach, abut, entangle, overlap, join, and contradict each other shows how complicated – and therefore, inherently natural – they are.

Movement across vā between places comes in a variety of currencies, from the economic (goods and services) to the familial (diaspora of children to live with extended family abroad), and combinations of both (lending and remittances). Often, the promise of better educational and employment opportunities drives (in some cases, forces) families to make the conscious decision to physically separate its members. Currencies of cultural knowledge are transferred in multiple forms, the most powerful of which can be stories. In Sia Figiel’s *Where We Once Belonged*, Figiel uses her characters (specifically Alofa, Siniva, and Filiga) to examine how they might navigate between and across vā. Alofa’s mother expresses this universal sentiment when speaking about her daughter to

her sister, Miti: “I want Alofa to go...go and find a life for herself in New Zealand” (235). The idea of (re-)birth (figuratively, to start a new life, and literally, to hide – even terminate – unwanted or unsanctioned pregnancies) is a central motivation for several of Figiel’s characters. And as is the case with actual births, along with the joys and triumphs of new life there also comes the chance of miscarriages or even death – of justice, of truth, of learning. Author and professor Caroline Sinavaiana comments on the beauty and tragedy of malaga:

“Alofa’s story (resembles a) cultural tapestry, the neocolonial narrative of circular migration – Pacific peoples, Islanders themselves moving as ocean currents among faraway islands and back home again. In this novel we see villagers departing from Samoa for the promised land of metropolitan NZ, only to return sooner or later in varying degrees of disillusionment or dishonor” (Sinavaiana 46).

It is necessary to note that, though some attempts at pursuing opportunities abroad may end in shame or disappointment, there is still a return home, thus affirming that this cultural movement is cyclical and restorative.

In his analysis and interpretation of Oceanic interconnectivity, Epeli Hau’ofa sees two levels of operation: one of government, bureaucracy, economy; and another of commoners, who live on despite the machinations of national and regional governing bodies. This is different from the ali’i-maka’ainānā model established by the kanaka maoli of traditional Hawai’i, because the system Hau’ofa sees is absent of accountability, interdependency and reciprocity between the two levels. In pre-(Western)contact Hawai’i, the practice of ‘Aikapu was not just the reciprocal relationship between chief and commoner, but, according to Hawaiian scholar Lilikalā Kame’eleihiwa, “the underpinning of the entire kapu system” in which the righteousness of the Mō’ī was only attained if the chief “could ensure the well being of the people” (36). Hau’ofa suggests that it is within this second level of operation that peoples of Oceania can reframe the discourse regarding their

“map.” In Samoa, the tagata fenua maintained order – through perpetuation of cultural practices, language, interconnectedness - while the higher-ups engaged in neo-colonialist practices. In Tahiti, certain communities (on the island of Taha’a, in particular) have embarked in re-establishing Rahui – endeavoring to regain political autonomy and restore cultural balance through the reclamation of traditional land and sea stewardship practices. From Auckland to Hagåtña, Oceanians persevere through their unique regional conflicts and shared societal struggles in various forms, with varying degrees of success.

With all the possibilities a boundless expanse offers, what are some factors that might hinder movement? Collective identity, gender, and collective guilt are considerations. The collective “We” that is in so many ways a cornerstone of Oceanic life can also serve to stifle the “I” of its individuals. Sexist misapplication of gender roles can be found in each region of Oceania. Guilt is wielded freely in many circumstances (often at the hand of The Word and/or archaic cultural tenets) where fear of shame, failure, abandonment of obligation, ostracism and retribution by family and community can all can discourage or retard movement. Language as a mechanism of control was readily activated within colonial systems of education, further promulgating these fears and leading young minds poised for movement to either “desire the role of oppressor or bind them to the role of oppressed” (Friere 3). The fog of Western religion(s) which has permeated nearly every Pasifika culture further exacerbates these fears, and combined with pre-existing cultural hierarchies reinforces a dominant-subordinate construction that can all but choke out motivations for creative enterprise, exchange and movement. The role of Christianity in infiltrating most of Oceania’s dominant class is key in maintaining the dominant-subordinate dependent relationship within a society as well as the broader dependence internationally.

To be valuable, theory and its articulation should have relevance to where you are (Lyons). Here we can see echoes of a number of philosophers and how their theories might be applied to Oceania. There are signs of Hegel's Lord and Bondsman allegory, where out of this dominant-subordinate relationship comes two forms of consciousness: that, with the drawing of borders and territories throughout the Pacific by dominant foreign entities, the self-consciousness of Oceania somehow needs to, via the consciousness of these foreign powers, identify itself. Certain theorists may choose particular binaries by which to analyze this dynamic: Marx might approach this theory via class; Friere, through theories he presents in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (ask anyone who attended school in Samoa – they can tell you that the “banking model of education” Friere posits was standard practice); DuBois could apply “the gaze” and its subsequent internalization; the effective self-regulation of the subject within the nuclear and extended family/village/island community can reflect the operation of an Althusserian Ideological State Apparatus (How are Oceanians being interpolated?); Gilroy's theory of racial melancholia in the form of Oceanians' inability to close wounds could pertain (has this led to racial melancholia becoming a necessary, permanent thread in the historical fabrics of Oceanic peoples?); Freud might point out evidence of self-sabotage; Said might suggest (in this case, Oceanic) identity identifies itself with something outside itself – that Oceanic self-consciousness is a result of recognition by another, non-Oceanic consciousness. Hau'ofa is arguing that Oceania needs no recognition from outside itself to gain self-consciousness, and in fact what is needed is to “wake up to th(e) ancient truth,” that “We are the sea, we are the ocean” (Hau'ofa 37). Perhaps Hau'ofa is also speaking to an individual self-determination of sorts, what Hermann Hesse asserts in *Narcissus and Goldmund* through his protagonist, Narcissus: that what we are all building toward is to find “the courage to be yourself” (Hesse 272).

Though malaga could be considered in some ways as grand, expansive odysseys, they are built on short, reliable commutes. Polynesians sailed to the next islands they could see, came back, then sailed to the ones after that, came back – malaga by malaga, building a network of villages while steadily obtaining “knowledge as they explored and settled the islands that stretched across the vast sea” (Wendt 1). Just as islanders would start with shorter, manageable trips, I gravitate toward shorter lines, especially when reading poetry. The decision is not a strategic one – sometimes it is not even a conscious one – but if I leaf through a collection, I am more apt to stop on pages with more white space. Perhaps it is laziness; or the opposite, that it is a time issue, making decisions based on budgeting the finite amount I have (*I can read twice as many short poems as long ones*). Perhaps it is a deficit of attention, that I do not trust myself to avoid distraction before reaching line’s end. Ultimately, ascertaining the reasons why I prefer shorter lines is secondary to the simple acknowledgement that I do. This affinity for linear brevity carries over to writing poetry. Using Hermann Hesse’s view of aphorisms, I lean toward compact poetry and short story because they are “sometimes like jewels; rarity increases their value, and they are enjoyable only in small doses.” When applying my mother’s “take small bites and chew thoroughly” approach to poems (not necessarily to fiction, as my tendency for detailed description can stretch sentence length), shorter lines seem more palatable, easier to digest. Like singers holding a note too long, their timbre thinning out, so can words in a line lose their force, falling flat like an exhale dying in a kazoo. They can get lost in a line like vodka in an extravagant bloody mary. The power in brevity heightens the importance of concision, which ultimately contributes to focusing the writing.

Ancient Polynesians took the time to examine the vā between man and the natural world, looking for any signals (what Hawaiians call hō‘ailona) that might inform their decisions to embark

on malaga. They used the space around their va'a as a guide, as an integral part of their navigation – maps of stars at night, the canvas of sky and clouds in day. So too do poets use the space around words as a factor in line organization. I rely on it most to serve in lieu of punctuation, as it is less disruptive to the eye and subtler in its effect on rhythm. Most of the pieces are left-justified in alignment, and aside from a few experiments with space “(colon)ized,” “dad’s death sponsored by,” “if”) most of the poems are relatively staid in their appearance. Perhaps this can be attributed to insecurity about my inadequacies as a visual artist. Like rhyme, if the creative manipulation of space on a page is not executed well, the result can be terribly distracting, which can spoil the poem without giving its words a chance to take effect.

The retention of word power and effect drive my decisions when it comes to most aspects of poetry (including line length, line breaks, stanza, rhyme, diction), but rhythm is often the deciding factor. There has to be a certain sustained cadence to lines for them to work (more evidence of rap/music influence). Shorter lines are apparent, especially in “morning tea,” “crow’s feet” and “hanging,” but they do not operate in isolation. There are lines of moderate length as well in most of the poems here (e.g. in “(H)Improvise(d)ing,” “Shaolin Mistress,” “Coming Home,” “Speaking in Tongues”) which are intended to work as set ups for the shorter lines, as well as maintain a certain conversational and storytelling tone. Meter (and closed form in general) is normally considered when discussing line length. Daniel McGuinness suggests that the line “has always been the container for feet” (McGuinness 273), and though I agree to a certain extent, here is where diction matters: I would use a word like “vessel” instead of “container” to more closely describe my viewpoint. I have always looked at meter with awe, how poets masterfully create sonic beauty within the confines of stress and syllable. When I compose, however, meter seems to serve as a distraction, to resemble

more of a mathematical equation than a verbal experiment.

When traveling across *vā*, between villages, there is a balancing act to maintain protocols of access while ensuring they do not serve as impediments to free movement, so accessibility is a priority in this collection. Diction should not serve as a barrier to the work. Simple language handled properly can achieve the desired effect. Words should not get in the way, nor should they be chosen without scrutiny of their denotative and connotative properties and careful consideration of the possible implications of their usage. One quotation hanging in my high school classroom is from nineteenth century English theorist Herbert Spencer: “How often misused words generate misleading thoughts.” It serves as a reminder to both myself and my students that the words we choose always have potential consequences, whether significant or not, and to weigh them accordingly. Enjoying the diction of a poem is itself a part of the experience. Just as a diner to a chef at a *prix fixe* dinner or a sushi bar, there is a trust afforded to the poet by the reader, a reliance on the poet’s discretion and aesthetic to attain Coleridge’s ideal of poetry: putting “the best words in the best order” (Bartlett).

In Oceanic writing, a common form of movement occurs along the thoroughfares connecting languages and dialects; however, the multi-lingualism of the Pasifika expanse is a conflicted one. Indigenous languages were cauterized when the tongues that carried them were colonized, primarily by English and French; and yet today, it is in these very *lingua franca* that much of Oceania tells its story, serving as both boomerang and ballast. The degree to which to utilize Pidgin (H.C.E. - Hawaiian Creole English) in both my poetry and prose is a constant internal battle, and I have yet to resolve this ambivalence. Earlier incarnations of short prose pieces “Times Run” and “Wanda” were originally conceived and drafted in Pidgin. What exists now are two versions of these stories, one in Pidgin, one in standard English. The latter is included here, while

the former retains its power and function with particular audiences and settings. In “Beer Bottle Play-By-Play,” standard English and Pidgin are blatantly deployed together, taking turns as the speakers change. Thus, the reader can appreciate the linguistic distinctions and similarities between the two dialects while also observing the underlying tension between speakers. Here also is an access point: the (often unknowing) condescension on one side and the self-determination and assertion of agency on the other, a familiar (and ongoing) conflict to most indigenous populations.

Whether channeling across *vā* to places familiar or foreign, Oceanic vessels did not arrive empty. Besides their own supplies for survival, voyagers brought with them gifts – items of significance that represented their place, items of value that would also be valued by their host. Even now, it is highly embarrassing for Oceanians to arrive somewhere empty-handed (even my Irish grandmother’s old saying, “Never show up with your arms dangling,” shares this protocol). Likewise, content is a key in providing the reader access to this work. These poems aim to speak to the familiarity with and connection to the human experience, not to dwell too long in the abstract. In essence, they are designed to reflect, in various ways, the crossing between and among the spaces we occupy – *Femalagaa’i i le Vā o Nu’u*. “morning tea” is a nod to the faithful partner’s first taste of betrayal. “afternoon” and the public restroom poems are for parents trying to navigate raising rascal boys. I was blessed with a wonderful upbringing, raised by two loving parents and reared by a web of villages – extended family, neighbors, teachers, coaches, other parents – between which I freely moved and within which I comfortably flourished. Hence, there is no abnormal trauma on which these writings are centered; there are no accounts of travails of surviving violence, suffering abuses nor dispossession, of rising above undue suffering. The examination of individual and collective identity runs throughout these pieces, including “fishing,” “tongues” and “in defense.” Other poems

orbit around family (“coming home;” “booth park;” “(h)improvis(d)ing”) and remembrance (“rolling”). Though the setting is often based in Oceania, the pieces are crafted to at once be singular in setting and universal in nature.

Ancient trails at sea, like ancient trails on land, are still traveled because they are efficient, safe, tried and true. Surely, they serve the aforementioned function of connecting, but what these trails also do is provide a way to view that from whence you came. They provide a vantage point: on land, it is the distance from sea; at sea, it is the distance from land. When perspective shifts, so does understanding. Illumination is often the beneficial byproduct of changing points of view. The same goes for stories. And when we commute – from one “island” to another, between each other, between who we think we are and who we really are – we further illuminate that space between. And we become again.

Part I: Poems

fishing with dynamite

The labor situation is most unique

In general, the native labor will be
sufficient and satisfactory.

However, there are several points that require
special mention:

Native Food supplies have to be maintained.

The natives have one great fault:

they have little foresight.

As long as they have sufficient
food in the ground for their needs,
they are satisfied.

They do not entirely grasp the fact that

when we take their
men for labor
they will have to rely on the women,
old men, and children
for plantation work.

We are making every attempt
to encourage
or force them
to keep planting in excess
so that there will always be adequate food
to supply the men.

If their food supply fails,

we will have to take over

the task of feeding the island
by the importation of rice
and by

fishing with dynamite.

- (from "Samoans and Military Work")

speaking in tongues

No one was smiling. No one ever smiled
 in these old photographs.
 Not just Grandma and Grandpa;
 in every picture relatives
 from decades past had that look –
 glum, flat, distant eyes
 each brown face hammered into place,
 a stone stare of surrender.
 There were no smiles to groove laugh lines
 over their temples, no comforting
 creases through cheeks to reassure me
 of people, kind and loving.

With a wink Grandma would sneak me
 a folded dollar bill
 from her smooth, firm hand
 and whisper *you good boy*
 in her thick Samoan accent.
 Grandpa never said much;
 he conveyed a peace that contradicted
 our father's stories of getting sasa.
 Grandpa's chuckles at our goofiness
 floated between subtle approval
 and muted delight. His witty one-liners
 more cryptic decrees than loving affirmations.

A blind shark can still smell

*The ulu leaf is quiet when it's alive
 but loud when it's dead*

The pictures did not tell us such things.
 That is the problem with pictures – the silence.

Grandma had a long white hair
 that fell from the mole on her cheek;
 it bounced on her breath when she spoke.
 That long white hair came alive
 with each word,
 with each p
 and f
 and s
 in Samoan.

It would dance when she laughed,
and on hot days it would cling to her cheek,
paralyzed by sweat.
She was proud of that long white hair.
Is good luck she would say, dismissing
our pleas to play with it lest she lose
a lifetime of good fortune
with one errant yank.

As for Grandpa, he thought
professional wrestling was real.

Their superstition made them
perfect Catholics. They shipped nine kids
to Hawai'i, where the nuns and priests
from Sacred Hearts and St. Patrick's
forbade my grandparents from speaking Samoan
at home. With blind devotion, my father's parents
promptly snipped their mother tongue
from their own – broken
English only to their children from then on.
My father was seven.

The older siblings had Samoan
cemented in their throats,
but for my father and the younger ones
the cement was never allowed to dry.
Hence my aversion toward priests and nuns –
they denied me the chance
to cement my own throat
with the p's
and f's
and s's of my ancestors.

Perhaps no one was smiling
in these photographs because
they feared their descendants
would be looking for tongues
that were not there.

rolling the dice

The Navy ran everything.

Samoans were neglected.

The Navy took over in 1900.

They've never left.

The Navy ran everything.

Grandpa ran the largest pool hall and
gambling house on the island;
it was for off-duty Naval officers.

Samoans were too poor to gamble.

The officers liked Grandpa. He took care of them.

Daddy left on the first ship out of Pago in '46.

A commander he took care of offered him a ride.

"Any room for a couple of my kids?" (I wonder if) Grandpa asked.

*Daddy, Marie and Theresa. They were
the first to leave. Aboard the Cat's Paw.*

Grandma had gone to Mid-Pacific for two years.
She knew the opportunity Hawai'i offered.
There was no economy in Samoa.

Mama had kids every two years from 1931 to '49.

Marie in '31, Theresa in '33,
Rosary in '35, Gretchen in '37.

*Then the first baby Clarence in '39.
He died soon after.*

Then Dad (the second baby Clarence) in '41,
(hānai) Anna Reed & Patrick in '43, John Christopher in '45;

Then the miscarriage in '47.

Finally, Aunty Yvonne in '49.

The only one born outside of Samoa.

*Theresa would always tease Daddy:
"That's how we know you got to Mama
at least ten times!"
Oh, that Theresa was something else.*

Aunty Theresa was something else.

*And the way Grandpa would laugh,
we knew she wasn't that far off. He always
claimed "ia, I knew how to space my coconuts."
Let's just say that Mama was...by the book.*

A job. From old gambling Navy officers.
Kāne'ohe Marine Base. Refrigeration mechanic.

The Navy ran everything.

Lā'ie with cousins – The Alapas –
for the first couple of months.

Catholics and Mormons.

Grandpa found a house in Kapahulu.

*No more living with Mormons.
We still shared a car though.
'38 Plymouth. Switched every Sunday.*

But Grandpa had found a house.

Who gets off a boat and pays cash for a house?

Grandpa was a big gambler.

It never sunk in until I lifted up the mattress.

Grandpa didn't like banks.

Thick stacks! Covering the whole frame!

The poker games lasted Friday to Sunday.

*Us kids spent all weekend in the yard.
"Alu ifafo!" (go play outside).*

And then

And then

And then, there was no more money under the mattress.

There was no more.

Something happened.

Something happened.

From then on, there was no more gambling.

Grandpa transferred to Pearl Harbor.

The Navy ran everything.

Fitafta

The role of the Fitafta Guard in any
defensive action
was clearly specified:

Fitafta section 1 –
Take the enemy forces
under fire
approaching east
of the Naval facility.

Control the spread of fire
during lulls in battle.

Fitafta section 3 –
Take enemy forces
under fire
approaching the malae.

Control fire
safeguard essential
material and records
as directed.

Be prepared to carry out
Naval Station Logistic Plan One
on order.

Fitafta section 4 –
Take enemy forces
under fire
approaching west
of the Naval facility.

control fire
during lulls in the battle.

Fitafta section 5 –
Take enemy forces
under fire
approaching the malae.

Be prepared to man fire truck

on order.

Power house detail –
control damage
to Naval Station power supply.

- (from “Samoans and Military Work”)

(Red Flea poems)

last period, English class

How easily colors erase

with a swipe

I wipe the white board

white again.

Mokulē'ia

naupaka mauka

naupaka makai

now Paka on the beach

stealing backpacks

morning, streamside

Lānai planks

still night-cool. Birds light

on old mango trees

choked by vines.

afternoon homework

The son
perched on the island
pinches then switches his tongue from the
greater than to less than
crooks of his mouth
while rounding numbers up or down
to make them sharp.

His big toe makes circles
melting fallen ice
on linoleum.
If he smears long enough
it will dry.

He claws frail bag-bottom half chips
and snaps them in cold-hardened dip
like an old shovel in the ground.

From a corner speaker
hand claps track beat –
troop boots smack street –
 Baby, Baby, where did our love go?
but all he hears
is his own voice in song
and the noodling chimes of the
ice cream truck.

Birth Day

Over kava and single malt
they laugh and weep and listen
as fathers whose hearts lie
in muddy spuds
in ulu and niu.

With ankles lodged in sand
heels dug deep in peat soaked from rain
certain to return again
my forefathers share fire
and curse the british.

They lean in
toward fire
toward each other
as fathers of fathers
of lovers
they would never know
whose blood swirls
like puddles of rain in earth
of sea in lava rock at
rising and falling tide.

They lean back
from fire
from each other
as fathers of mothers
of lovers
they would never know
whose breath fills
gills of sails
which float dreams –
kisses from crisp sea cliffs –
and launch
razorbills and manusina
that clutch seeds
in their beaks
which scatter
with each cry.

[The razorbill is a colonial seabird which comes to land for BREEDING PURPOSES ONLY]

Booth Park

My young hands clutched
his thick rubbery ears
and kinky sponge of hair that shared
the subtle strength and surprising softness
of a worn Brillo pad.

His baritone bark boomed
urgent words of encouragement
through my bowels and tickled the small of my back.

His hearty paws gently
pinched my bony ankles
flexing only when my balance was broken
like independent suspension on a Buick
or a sailor on deck in high seas.

My inner thighs
scraped cheek stubble
as my knees frisked his sideburns.

Craning my neck
I snapped my eyes skyward
to catch clouds chatting
like smoke signals
against a blue canvas –
a dragon, a mo'o, the witch from Snow White –
scrolling makai and out of view
until the last batter was retired.

life playbook for sons, page 1: peeing in public bathrooms

In an empty bathroom, select urinals
at farthest edges
this affords guys behind you
more options (see below).

in a semi-crowded bathroom, select urinals
leaving at least one empty slot between you
and nearest guy (choice created
by guys before you who went to the edges).

Never choose a toilet if a urinal is available.

In a crowded bathroom, take the first option available;
however, if only toilet is available, check at least
three dudes behind you
to make sure they don't have to grunt
before you take stall. Courtesy.

Don't bite the front of your shirt
to hold it up
your saliva leaves a wet patch.
Instead, pull front up and tuck under chin.

If bareballs
or wearing bebs,
pull waist band down
PAST your polos.
Going only under boto
pushes the elastic waistband up
and increases chance
of friendly fire
back onto yourself.

Aim into water or hole
stand back enough
to avoid splash back
from pee stream force

off porcelain backsplash

Feet not too wide in case
your neighbor is sloppy.

Whether at urinal
or trough
eyes up
eyes down
eyes straight ahead

but never
side to side
face to face.

Stare at your laces
at the wall
at the ceiling
even when talking

feel the pleasure of pee
and fart
leaving your body.

If outside
on the continent
in winter
embrace the pee heat
steaming up

and write your name
in melting snow.

life playbook for sons, part 2: taking a grunt in public restrooms

before entering
tie laces high
if you're wearing shoes

Make sure there is enough paper
and the roll action is sufficient
before committing to stall

give seat a solid wipe down
(including exposed front bowl section)

If situation is nasty
shift into no-contact squat mode

do not bite the front of your shirt –
your saliva leaves a wet patch
and everyone will know
you just took a grunt

Instead, cinch shirt up and pinch
to ribs with arms
(see: chin technique when peeing).

roll bottom of shorts up
so they don't touch the ground
when you sit down

Push feet forward enough so shorts
don't touch front bottom of bowl
(where missed piss often dribbles down)

when you get older
when your boto is bigger
tuck to avoid contact with
front lip of bowl
but don't release
in case water level is high

or inside of bowl is within your drop zone

two-finger press on upper boto
to keep it from unwanted contact.

Courtesy flush between load drops. Adjust cheeks if
flush splashes up

Stand to wipe with legs wide so knees lock shorts
from falling
wipe up wipe down (be careful not to brush back of olos)
check between each
“wipe ‘til it’s white” to ensure solid cleanup
(don’t forget cheeks if flush water splashed up)

Avoid floor/bowl contact when pulling shorts up
push flush handle with feet
head straight to sink and wash hands well
(even if there is no more soap)

Dialogue and eye contact
can now re-engage
Wet wipe face
check for boogers in mirror
dry hands
take deep breath

through your mouth.

under the frangipani

She lies on her back
arms thrown to her side
like felled trees when their time has come
and lets her eyes fall
to rest under the old plumeria tree
that rises knowingly above her.
'Thick round fingers
of newly cut crab grass
cool her bare shoulders down
to the small of her back
where the pareu dips from her neck.

'The first breeze whispers over her
its long hair draping her from head to heel
painting her calm.
'The next breeze tickles her skin –
eager, instinctive tingles fire
across her inner thighs.

She fiddles with freshly fallen plumeria,
lightly pinching the stems
twirling them lazily
letting their bright white milk drip
in her palms. With lips licked and pursed,
her tongue gently presses
to the roof of her mouth.

Slowly flipping the flower over,
she holds the firm stem between her fingers
like a cigarette.

On lids now melted over soothed eyes
petals rest softly
then brush listlessly over her broad nose
where she smokes
the savory fragrance
with her slightly parted lips.

Her tongue peeks out.
They are supple and smooth, these petals,
clean and limber like earlobes freshly bathed.
Despite a day in the sun
they have reclaimed their coolness
from their few moments in the afternoon shade.
She dances them over her face
to soothe the heat breathing from
her penny brown cheeks.

She does the same over her piko
with the other flower,
lightly swishing lower
underneath a fold in her pareu.

The petals rise and fall
with each deep breath.
By now, the sunset wind
has puffed her pareu aside,
exposing her body to a papaya red sky.

Her fingers steadily
pinch and twirl and
pinch and twirl and
pinch and twirl
until at last

she gulps her inhaled,
gathering them into a final breath
and booms
“Raimana! Teva!”

In a moment, her sons glide
dutifully across the yard to her side
from the lanai. One lithe and mild-eyed
the other sinewy and sure
they both plant their bare feet
in the cool crab grass
each reaching down for her heavy paws
and heaving skyward like sailors pulling anchor.

Though they've done this all their lives
the sons cannot keep reflexive grunts
from hissing through their clenched teeth.
They nimbly slip their heads into her armpits –
bountiful flesh swallowing their necks
and blanketing their sharp shoulders.
Their hands disappear
into the folds of her back.
The boys match each taxing step
to her laboring breath
as the three trudge toward the lānai.

Under the frangipani
freshly crushed petals
set to regaining their curves
in the falling dusk.

coming home

The parted bead curtain crickles behind him
 the darkness and sour smoke
 welcoming him
 home.

He trades his ticket for the first beer
 he sees through crying condensation
 on the back bar glass door. Kenji
 does not recognize him and he is relieved.
 Cracked Coke crates, now faint orange
 stack right of the spill sink
 where he had his first drink and so on
 with Jasmine, the empty-eyed Thai one.
Re-lac, re-lac, I not gon' teoh.

Stale A/C and smoke and black lights
 chew his nostrils and drop his eyes.
 He peels the oval label from green glass –
 nails digging moist paper
 from cold glue – knowing all this paid for school.

Chastity is center stage fronting
 green and red lighted tiles
 of the Marlboro machine where he used to
 play Stevie Wonder and Star Trek and Doctor.

The song ends.
 Charity replaces Chastity
 who is now on all fours –
 heels silver tailfins leveled at bolo head row –
 a '59 Eldorado revving to drag.
 With circular swipes on worn black lacquer
 she paws singles into the top hat
 that was last to fall.

A mile away, her mother kneels

reaching for bills left at checkout
that had fallen behind the mini-bar.

Their hauls will make the same
Western Union wire to Khon Kaen
in the morning. The mother
drops her head and thinks of her daughter
in lipstick-red corner booths
with the sunken gold buttons
that exhale smoke and voice and vice
You so stu-ron-gub
and giggles and breathy men
coming
home.

Shaolin mistress

It had been sloppy, just like was
for Kala Boy and Rina the time
she watched them through the rusted screen
and missing louver.

Drags from her Kool Mild can't mask
the metallic smell of blood soaked
into her hangnails.

She kills the butt underneath the flaking railing
and pokes it in her pocket.
Fahk, no smoke bumbai my mom dem fine um.
She yanks the butt out and slaps it on the lanai steps.
I hope dat bitch fine um she hisses.

The kitchen screen whines and smacks
as she spills in. Hot water pisses
in the sink on the now pink sheet.
Frick, bettah get dat out he growls from the couch.

Choking the handle, she tugs open the icebox.
Her eyes stab the shelves. She cracks open
the Lowenbrau she snatched from behind the expired mayo.

She crashes onto the stool she kicks out
from under the wobbly card table.
The punk coil spits ash on scratched out math problems.
Tobasco crust melts
into old shoyu rings from lunch.
Peanuts soak in a silver mixing bowl.

From the black and white in the parlor
Black Belt Theater slices the air
Humph! Tiger Style no match for Praying Mantis!

Swiping her eyes
with the back of her wrists
she shoots over the table
and swallows him whole.

morning tea

Crushed leaves steep
 caramel fingers bleed down
 through freshly boiled water.
 A spoon flick swirls
 erasing my mirrored eyes.

From the foot of the bed I dip
 fresh falaoa smeared with Anchor butter
 into koko Samoa and
 swallow my lower lip
 blowing ripples that shudder
 the surface, cooling, and sip
 and watch your dreaming eyelids
 spasm and flutter.

I prepare your cup – pluck tea bag
 from brew, resting it in the spoon's palm
 like a pound of flesh.
 As you shift in the sheets I hear
 his name
 on your lips
 and strangle the sagging pouch
 with its own string.

crow's feet

age cuts cut
 through skin as sky
 through sea as blood
 through land as flesh
 through rock as bone

fissures carved from
 false words

beauty webs off
 from corners of eyes brown
 as niu husks

wisdom arrows in
 toward corners of eyes white
 as niu milk

cornea colors rub and coil
 like the middle of marbles
 like passengers passing
 at terminal gates
 at

Faleolo

Fagali'i

Faaā

Tafuna

Tamuning

Tongatapu

Hanan

Honiara

Honolulu

not knowing
 their destin(y)tion.

At the Gate

Reading eyes jerk and lurch like
the sudden start
and stop
of train cars
so catching her eyes slide evenly
across the rails of the page told him
she wasn't reading
the floppy paperback
pronged between her pinky
and thumb.
Twelve years had sharpened
his sense of when she was
about to look at him,
so the boarding pass
jutting from his shirt pocket scraped
the stubble on his jaw as he
flipped his eyes down at the spreadsheet
he lied about having to do.

Her eyes shot through
his thinning hair
to the pinching red horizon
lining the upper lip of the tarmac.
His eyes lifted to see her middle finger
ribbing the dried exposed glue
of the book's spine.

Both of them
reading between the lines.

monsanto clause

You made your list
And checked it twice
Not checking the price
We all pay

We care more about needles
in ballplayers' asses
than needles
in our cattle masses
as hor(ror)mones slip past kids'
lips with each

sip, suck, slurp
of white gold

rip, cut, burp
of T-bone

baste, fry, boil
of oxtail

blanche, steam, broil
of blood cell

until

little Kimo

needs a little chemo.

(colon)ized

WHEN

YOU

FEED

US

YOUR

FETUS

YOU

STRANGLE

US

WITH

YOUR

BIBLICAL

CORD

Dad's death is sponsored by

- Provider Plus -
 -
 Modular Services- - - - - CareFusion
 - Alaris Pump -
 - Boehringer -
 CADD-Prizm - - - - - PCS II
 - AccuMax -
 - Pressure -
 Quantum Convertible - - - - - BD Recycleen
 - Cardinal Health -
 - Welch-Allyn -
 EcoLab - - - - - MED PAT
 - Philips IntelliVue -
 - Stryker -
 Covidien - - - - - Syst-----
 - Re di strib uti on -
 -----GCX Instrument-----Kimberly-Clark-----Nitrile Exam Gloves-----

in defense of smelling my own farts

I smell my farts.
 Not smell them as in notice them
 but smell them as in actively seek out their scent
 like a dog around a telephone pole.
 I smell my farts like a wine snob
 sniffs a swirled syrah
 looking for body, aroma, mouthfeel, texture, finish.
 Is it round and mealy
 full of earth tones and gumption?
 Or is it slender and elegant,
 sleek and high-pitched in its sweet stink?
 Did it clatter and pop like a fireworks show
 or sneak out like a whispered secret?

Sometimes I lock the car windows
 so my kids have no other choice
 but to eat my fetid air
 and learn their heritage –
 “Breathe through your mouth” I tell them.

I smell my farts to breathe
 the gas of my ancestors
 whose guts were colonized
 by bacteria from foods indigestible –
 fibrous and sugared, packaged and canned –
 the stench caught under the blanket of centuries.
 I smell my farts to warm and burn my nostrils,
 to pinch their stench on the roof of my mouth
 with my tongue, to hold them there
 for a moment more
 to taste what my ancestors tasted,
 to smell what they smelled.

(h)improvis(d)ing

No shirt. Dad's standard look
 around the house. His hairy gut,
 taut like a water balloon
 the color of baked manapua,
 stood at attention, locking in the
 hastily tied knot of his lavalava. I learned
 early that hair can grow in such odd places –
 in the outer ear canal
 on the hump of the neck
 on triangular slats of the lats
 on the small of the back –
 and that there was both a mild
 repugnance and a beautiful
 symmetry to it.

It was my small kid birthday party
 with no cool games layed out, just an open deck
 overlooking the driveway and Ka'imukī. After
 I bemoaned the lameness of the set up,
 I was desperate. Friends milled around
 in the living room, politely searching
 for some sign of a party. Dad scoffed in disbelief.
 "What do you mean? Of course we have games!"
 he exclaimed, and proceeded to grab a broom.
 "Everybody, make a circle on the deck!" he announced,
 all us seven year olds obliging. Planting himself
 regally in the middle, he stood the broom
 straight up – broom side down –
 and let go.

As the worn brown handle fell
 toward Benny Shibuya, Dad snagged it
 at the last moment. An impressive physical
 feat. The quickness of step and agility of reach
 belied his heavy frame.
 They all erupted in cheers.
 Then he did it again. Toward Jason Pacheco.
 Louder cheers. Again. Toward K.J. Kwock.
 More cheers.
 I was in disbelief. Hopping around with his bare

bulge of belly hanging over the faded yellow lavalava,
 his hardened purple nipples poking through
 curly chest hair, he looked like a mix between
 a weathered rhinoceros and an old sumo wrestler
 to whom retirement had not been kind.

The made-up games continued, as did the laughs,
 and when my friends had gone
 he yawned “Last trick” at me
 and stood the broom
 straight up – broom side down –
 and let go.

As the handle clacked at my feet
 on the parlor tile
 (no acrobatic save this time)
 I asked
 “What trick is that?”

He had already dumped himself
 into his Lazy Boy and yanked up
 the synthetic wood lever like
 an emergency brake.

He smirked, yawned
 “How to watch your son
 clean up after his own party”

and leaned back
 for his afternoon nap.

kukui gardens

Because Auntie worked graveyard shift
 we had to clean house early or else
 Rose would get sa sa and take it out on us
 in the housing with no houses

Before playing Jacks or War
 we would check the laundr(y)mat machines for
 stray coins to buy icees
 and lemon peel or bag Jolly Ranchers

When Chinese jump rope stalled because
 Jojo kicked too hard and broke Theresa's handle
 Oka, oka
 it was up the government-built stairs for
 sliced white bread, pisupo and diluted Lu'au punch

We conquered the summer rain with
 dance routines on the cool tile and
 Marvin Gaye 45s

Baaaby, I get sick this mornin'
 A sea was stormin' inside-a-me

The needle was surgically plucked then placed repeatedly
 in grooved wax to make sure we nailed the lyrics

Baaaaby, I think I'm capsizin'
 'The waves are risin' and risin'

First one done with chores
 had first crack at controlling
 the brown push button cable box

We lasted late for Night Flight on USA
 Escape from New York on HBO
 and rated R movies that taught us

cussing and kissing
violence and betrayal

We prayed our girl cousins would fall asleep first
so we could punch the numbers at the end of the dial
where we would wait, hushed
for flesh to flash through wiggling colored lines

There we dreamed, sweaty
on the parlor fala
only each other for pillow and sheet
Our skin tan from a summer in the sun
Our bones firm from millennia on the sea

There we awoke, sweaty
on the parlor fala (who wen' hog-cheese da fan?)
limbs braided like the pandanus fibers beneath us
unaware we were weaving
the basket that carries us still.

If	you	haole	you	rich
If	you	yobo	you	pushy
If	you	pake	you	cheap
If	you	japanee	you	obey
If	you	pinay	you	put out
If	you	popolo	you	can ball
If	you	hawaiian	you	lazy
If	you	tongan	you	eat horse
If	you	sole	you	like scrap
If	you	christian	you	can judge
If	you	think this	you	in trouble

HANGING

Ai se mea 'ai

But –
juice is too sweet
bread is too salty
and chewing rice
feels like biting gecko guts.

Inu se vai

But –
each sip turns to saline
in my throat
each sip turns to day-old
chew spit
in my stomach pit.

Manava tele

But –
my tongue is velcro
on the roof of my mouth
separated only with violent rips.

Alu e taoto

But –
the fan is a blow dryer and
my ears are kiln-baked
papier-mache claws
grinding into the sun-dried coral
of my pillow.

Alu e moe

But –
my eyes are bulging bullfrogs
ready to slide through my nostrils
once my sandpaper eyelids scratch shut.

'Ana e toe 'inu

But
but damn –
last night was fun.

Aik(ae)ido

When you're palagi
you get to go
to church and sweat and
be fanned and fawned over

When you're afakasi
you have to
stay back and sweat and
fan the flames of the umu

When you're palagi
you get to
sleep through morning lotu
then watch Manu Samoa vs. Fiji
at Apia Park

When you're afakasi
you have to
stay back and
miss Manu Samoa vs. Fiji at Apia Park
to help with the fa'alavelave

But

When you're palagi
you have to
pay two tala for bottle
Le Vai with the safety ring broken
from Maketi Fou

When you're afakasi
you get to
pay two bottles Johnny Walker for fresh-pressed passports
from the civil servant in a basement cubicle

When you're palagi
you have to
answer to history because
you wrote it

When you're afakasi
you get to
answer to history because
you're palagi too
so learn how to use it.

beer bottle play-by-play

Britt: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, thanks for tuning in and welcome...to another edition of HI Life – where everyday life is our main event. I am your host, Britt Lawland. And as always I am joined by my sidekick –

Ha'a: Brah, what I told about dat kine condescending kine language? I goin' sidekick your face pretty soon.

Britt: My bad there, partner – I am joined by my colleague and expert on all things local, Ha'a Tupua-Remedios.

Ha'a: Hahzet.

This season has been an exciting one here in lovely Hawaii -

Ha'a: Babooze, no fo'get da 'okina.

Britt: (chuckles) Hawai'i. Working on that one, partner, working on that one. Hard to top last week's aunty-uncle dance-off debacle at the baby luau in Kahaluu – still trying to clear my mind of that muumuu malfunction – but we've got a dandy one for you this week. Let's first head to your standard house party in the valley. A nucleus of young men play instruments of sorts under bare fluorescent bulbs in the garage –

Ha'a: Dass one Kanikapila.

Britt: Precisely the word I was looking for (chuckle).

Ha'a: Dass Poncho dem's tutu's place. Get Jojo dem's graduation pa'ina tomorrow so the boys just pau clean fish – scrape kole lidat – so dey stay suckin um now.

Britt: As they should. Well-deserved. Black hair and brown skin once again dominate the scene –

Ha'a: No get racist, you fricka.

Britt: – easy, partner, just painting the scene for our listeners. In the peripheral shadows stand a majority of the crowd, but it's difficult to make out any faces because the streetlight is out and most are wearing flat-billed hats. Have to say, Ha'a, if it weren't for the garage light hitting their earrings, chains and beer cans, they'd seem like apparitions lurking to collect a few souls.

Ha'a: Nevah mind dat kine. This ain't poetry hour. Speak regular.

Britt: (aside: Okaaay) Looks like black Tap Out and Affliction shirts are the chemise du jour.

Ha'a: Spyda Grove wen fight on the undacard tonight. Lost one split decision. Was booshit.

Britt: Well that explains it then. I do notice most of the fellas leaning on their toes a bit more than usual.

Ha'a: Guys loss plenny money so they all sick. They wen pound Kendall. Frickin' Brazilian was stallin'. Was booshit.

Britt: Unfortunate indeed. Gotta know when to hold em and when to fold em...
What do we have here? There seems to be a kerfuffle brewing toward the end of the driveway –

Ha'a: Dass Wadey Boy dem. Young punk from town. He stay dating Poncho's ex.

Britt: Ah, a recipe for trouble.

Ha'a: She hapai but Poncho foun' out wasn't his.

Britt: Whoa, Ha'a – save the drama for your mama.

Ha'a: But Wadey Boy don't know dass not his bebe neidah. Dass Dilton Lui-Kwan's one. So these guys makin' for not'ing.

Britt: Turn up the heat! You go, Perez Hilton.

Ha'a: Whachu call me?

Britt: Harmless allusion, my friend. There is some bouncing around and...a circle has formed! A circle. Has. Formed!

Ha'a: Wadey goin' catch cracks.

Britt: And...shirts are off! Ladies and gentlemen, the gauntlet has been thrown down! Poncho is standing silent and firm while the challenger bounces and dances and shouts expletives. The tattoo count is about even, though the challenger's colored fish on his forearm and cursive neck tat of, presumably, a girl's name, might give him a slight edge in that department.

Ha'a: He part Japanee and tried fo' make Yakuza kine but the thing came out weak sauce.

Britt: This Wade guy certainly looks the part.

Ha'a: He stay BJ Penn's cousin so he tink he bad, but I tink Poncho goin' give him dirties.

Britt: I have to agree, my money's on the stalwart veteran with the home turf advantage. A chorus of barking dogs have started up. We did have the chance at an all-out brawl, but it looks like the lieutenants from each side have reached a détente-

Ha'a: - Too bad Wadey boy wen reach one de-tantaran.

Britt: Partner, I don't know what the hell you just said but our producer, Moani, has split her gut laughing.

Ha'a: Nah nah, Poncho's cousin Dally Girl get bebes wit da guy Ahonui who stay wit Wadey Boy, so dass why dey jus' let um go up-n-up.

Britt: Straight Paris-Achilles style. Gotta love the family ties. Whoa! Wade quickly launches toward Poncho with a jump kick and...Oh my! The challenger is down! And he's out! Just like that! Wade tried a fancy jump kick and Poncho stepped to the side to deliver two decisive strikes. He went down like a sack of unripened mangoes. Cue the lullaby; it's night-night for Wadey Boy!

Ha'a: Told you. Poncho wen give him the sidestep action, then came wit' what the sole's call the "1-2-pā'ū."

Britt: Your penchant for linguistics never ceases to amaze me.

Ha'a: Se aikae.

Britt: Exxxactly. It looks like this Wade character has finally come to and is helped to his feet. He looks groggy but certainly seems to have his faculties about him. Concussion protocol looming for sure. Meanwhile, Poncho is in tears and being held back by a few of his comrades. Is he going back for more?

Ha'a: No, brah, he stay all rip, and he stay cryin cuz he feel bad cuz he wen disrespect' his tutuman by scrappin' at the house. The grave stay in the cornah by the mock orange.

Britt: Gramps is having none of that. Poncho has made his way back to Wade, but they seem to be...embracing?

Ha'a: He feel guilty fo dirshing Wadey Boy cuz Poncho use to work roofing for Wadey Boy's uncle, so he stay apologizin'.

Britt: Looks like the feeling's mutual, as tears flow from the defeated as well. Looks like they're hugging this one out, ladies and gents. The crowd has dissipated a bit. The music has started up again. Some are heading for the garage...

Ha'a: Guarans Jarry bussin' out the felt for Hold 'Em. Fricka's one chronic. He go Vegas every oddah month.

Britt: Didi Ah Yo and away we go. Others float deeper into the darkness. I can make out pairs of elbows hitched on the railings of a truck bed.

Ha'a: Fass kine burn sesh.

Britt: Not my thing, partner, but anything to ease tensions.

Ha'a: Pau already. They wen squash um.

Britt: Prudent, indeed. After the break, we head to Job Corps field for the Bojo Candido Pinto baseball tournament, where tapped dads posture and threaten each other while their nine year olds look forward to a completely unnecessary post-game potluck buffet. Sound like a plan, partner?

Ha'a: Shoot. No fo'get yo' sunblock, Pinky Tuscadero.

Britt: hehe. Knew that was coming and it still worked. Touche. We'll be right back on this edition of HI Life.

Part II: Fiction & Life Writing**Times Run**

“Membra, Jo, no get Wonder Bread like last time. Too expensive. Get Love’s.” Dottie girl poked through pens and coins in the “Cec Heftel for Governor” mug on the shelf and grabbed the wrinkled bill and flicked it to Jojo. “Dollah each, you guys, dass it. And no waste money on dose stupet comic books – I know how much change supposed to get leff.” Jojo waited for her to turn before scrunching his face mockingly, silently mimicking her last line. He was the oldest of his siblings, and he didn’t like taking orders from his older cousin. I was fine with it – she may have been tough but I always felt safe.

I was distracted by the bill I eagerly fingered in my pocket – a special two dollar bill, one my dad gave me on my birthday a couple months back. L 10213005 A. I had already memorized the cereal number. He had cherished that bill since small kid time in Kapahulu, when my grandpa wen’ sneak it to him after my Dad’s confirmation (Grandma was superstitious about these bills and never allow them in the house). The deal was, my dad could never spend it. It was to keep for good luck, his dad had said. The same went for me. So I kept it close and pinched it plenty.

We could hear the commercial for Ponderosa Pines trailing away as we hopped down the outside stairs to make the Times run, and we knew we had to be back before Donahue ended so we could change channels to Professor Fun when Dottie went lanai for smoke. I told Jojo my friend Blake Miyake from school said he was going be on Professor Fun that afternoon and I wanted to see if Blake bulai or not. “Ho, big bucks!” I whispered. Jojo was older, so he got to carry the bill, but when we turned the corner of the cinderblock government housing, he let me look.

I stretched it out so I could see all the French words good. Had one haole guy staring all serious in the middle, his face like the guys in Pop Warner pictures who have the double horse collar just for make. I never figured why these presidents – Jackson, this one – wore wigs. Ron Shimotsu at school said they powdered the wigs white for make themselves look “distinguished.” They never know they looked like girls? Plus, mom was always calling her white hair “evil” and swearing at somebody named V-O 5. It’s probably the same guy called Seagram who makes the brown stinky stuff Aunty Eve calls her “medicine” that she pours into her glass of RC Cola at Thanksgiving.

The asphalt wen’ burn my bare feet (“‘cause if you fo’get yo’ slippahs dass yo’ ass fault!” Dottie Girl would say), but I didn’t want anyone to see me prancing painfully, so I made popping moves with my arms to make like I wen’ mean to walk that way. Jojo snatched back the bill before I could check how many zeroes had in the green serial number. My cousin Tiloi would always check everyone’s dollar bills for zeroes, and if had plenny he would switch. He said if he had one with plenny zeroes he could turn that dollar into twenty. I never care; one dollar was one dollar in my book.

I knew why Jojo grabbed it back – the last thing we wanted was for the Mayor Wright boys across Liliha Street to think we had money. Then, we would get lickin’s twice: one time from them and one time from Dottie when we got home with no bread. We just saw last week Remy Balason get chased as he came back from Tuli’s Market, so we knew to watch out. I slyly pulled the Jefferson from my pocket and slipped it inside the side waist of my bebedees.

The good thing about going store with Jojo was that he lived most of the year in Samoa so he didn’t know any better. He would stand up to the Mayor Wright boys whenever they tried to hassle us. My only line of defense was timidly claiming that my dad was one cop and would bus’ them if they made trouble to us. Jojo was no shame too. He almost always wore the same Hawai’i

'81 cut-shirt with the blue shoulders and stripes and white bottom part, and faded dark brown O.P. shorts with the light brown pockets. Funny how people from other places no shame and dress any kine.

We had to go all the way out the housing driveway to the sidewalk before turning up to go to Times. The shortcut through the grass underneath the monkeypod trees always had broken glass and sleeping grass and pokies surrounding abandoned cars. Inside the empty cars with no doors there were sometimes guys that were all hauna – we could smell them from the road if the trades were blowing – and talking to themselves, with bulging plastic bags all bunched together like grounded balloons. Never could see who they were talking to. One guy, Richard was his name, carried around a small white radio that fit in his crusty hand. He would press it hard against his ear and laugh and cry and shout, like he was talking long distance, kind of like how mom did when she wen' talk to Aunty Jeanie in Maine.

Sure enough, I wen' see three guys walking at us from the low wall in front of Mayor Wright's where they sat all day spitting and making tough. They wore red tablecloth triangles folded neatly that dangled from the back pocket of their Dickies. Was the same rags Cooter and Uncle Jesse from Dukes of Hazzard had in their pockets, but these guys never use them to wipe engine grease from their hands. They walked with one forced limp, like they was sneaking sodas inside their pants into the movies. I wen' readjust my shorts to keep the Jefferson snug. "What Jojo, race to the light?" I never like him think I was scared but I also never like get mobbed.

"Oka, sole, again? I always win. Even from last summer."

"Dollah bet?"

"OK, but don't get mad when I'm reading the latest X-Men that I bought with your dollar; I can even get an icee now" he gloated. Halaaah I thought. Not supposed to get comics. Dottie Girl

going be piss off. Now I was even more set on winning 'cause I never like her get mad. She wen' love us and wen' look after us, but sometimes she lost her cool. Mom said she just had some issues; I never know what that meant and I never like find out.

The Mayor Wright boys was now on the same side of the street as us, so I counted really loud for make those guys think we was planning on racing the whole time. "Go!" I wen' yell after I wen' already start running. Jimmy Jordan at school would get mad when I wen' start races like that, but he was more fast than me so I would just say "Too bad, so sad." Since I wen' only hear one pair of feet smacking the pavement, I knew I was going win. At the light, I wanted for celebrate because Jojo had quit halfway, but I never like make the Mayor Wright boys think I was soft. Plus, I wen' cheat so never count anyway. The Mayor Wright boys wen' veer off under the monkeypod trees for go smoke and swear, so the race was for nothing. Jojo took long time. He was always looking around like he stay spacing out or something; every time I had for wait for him. I think he think he better than me 'cause he get small kine moustache and little bit hair on top his olos. Whatever. I was so far ahead of him and my feet was sore, so I wen' cross Vineyard alone. He wen' know where Times was.

Inside Times, the A/C hugged me like Uncle Namu's pool when we wen' play Lipton Ice Tea guy and fall in backwards. My feet was smiling, toes spread out and reaching for new space on top the cold tile. I wen' pass the coffee aisle, which wen' smell like Ms. Oyama's math class without the fruity perfume mixed in, and wen' find the frozen food. I wen' open up the door for write my name in the condensation. Could reach the Jolly Green Giant, so I wen' sneak in one quick squeeze of the peas. By the time I wen' close the door, all that was left on the inside window was the "wuz hea" with lines dripping down.

“Hurry up and go get the bread,” Jojo shouted down the aisle, “or else Auntie Dottie’s going to have the controller all afternoon. Then meet me at the magazines.” Auntie Dottie he had for call her. My Auntie Toni was his grandma, so when he make big time ‘cause he stay older, I bus’ out that I stay one whole generation above him. I tell him “blood stay thicker than water.” He wen’ go “Tama valea, sole that doesn’t even make sense.” Sometimes I just want for punch his face.

I wen’ finger the lucky bill in my right pocket, almost petting kine, just for re-insure myself. I wen’ run down three more aisles before I saw the shiny white tubes of Wonder Bread with the red yellow blue polka dots. I knew the Love’s was right next to them because Mom says that’s how they organize ‘um, just like how she says I should make my room. I wen’ remember to check the date on top to get the freshest one like how mom said. Good thing I wen’ grab the bread because Jojo never knew for check. Whenever he wen’ grab bread, we wen’ have to make toast after one day for burn off the white mold crystals on the top.

With the top of the bread bag clench in my knuckles, I wen’ head to the magazines for find Jojo. He was leaning against the rack, gently holding open the newest X-Men. I could tell was X-Men because I wen’ see Wolverine on the front cover jumping off the page. His head and shoulders was way bigger than his legs and he was running in mid-air. But I knew was just one trick for make you buy ‘um; in real life his head and legs was same same.

“We go already. I get the bread.” I was little bit jealous ‘cause he was reading the latest addition and not me. But I really wanted for go too ‘cause Professor Fun was almost on.

“Walk out right now. Walk. Don’t run” Jojo said quiet kine without opening his teeth. His eyes was still acting like he stay reading, like Maxwell Smart talking secret kine to Agent 99.

“Brah, you get the money, go buy ‘um.”

He wen' look around and then at me and then around again and said, "Just go. Nobody's watching." Almost whispers, he was talking, so I had for make all secret too.

"And what? Steal um?" I wen' hiss. "You no 'member what wen happen crack seed store last time? We get 'nough money, dummy. Hurry up and go buy 'um." I not one rat like the guy on Hill Street Blues. What if the workers see?

"Look, it's just bread. If they catch you, just make sad eyes and tell a sob story about being hungry and what not. We can't use that trick with a comic book, get it? When you go outside, keep walking. Running draws attention. I'll go buy this X-Men and we can share it."

"And what about the change? Dottie Girl goin know."

"No, she won't. She's too busy talking on the phone. I'll just crumple the bills and slam the change in the jar. She never checks. She's just trying to intimidate us. You're too young to understand. Just go."

The next time he busses out "too young" on me I goin kick him in the olos. But, he did say we can share the new X-Men. I wonder if I can take 'um school. I like show Darren Takara and tell him go wop his jaws. Him and Bobby Gouveia always make tantaran 'cause they get all the kine comics with the plastic cover and special box and everything.

"I can take 'um school Monday?" I figure if he no let me then he can steal his own damn bread.

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"Yes, yes."

"Pinky bet then." If he never pinky bet I knew he bulai. I stuck out my hand like one shaka but with no more thumb.

“You are such a little kid. When are you going to grow up? Fine.” He stuck out his pinky and whacked mine, but I made him go again ‘cause we never lock.

“Pounce,” I whispered.

I wen’ make one loop around the fruit section for make big ches’ and get all confident, then I jus wen zone out. I wen’ reach down to grab the bill and wen’ switch ‘um to my left pocket for get re-focused. Dunt dunt, dun DA, dunt dunt, dun da. I wen’ hum the Mission Impossible song for like fifty times: past the horsey ride outside the door; across the street; past the Mayor Wright boys under the tree smoking in the bus’ up car; past Richard yelling at his radio, and over the hot asphalt. I finally wen’ stop underneath the corner stairs and wait for Jojo. My heart was pounding in my throat; felt like one boar contractor trying for jump out my mouth. I seen Jojo by the gate so I wen’ know we was safe. He was all calm, cool and connected (How come I cannot be like that?).

“Nice work,” he said. He wen’ smile and pinch the back of my neck – not hard kine, so I knew I wen’ do good. “Fix the bread. Aunty Dottie’s gonna yell if she sees it squashed like that.”

“Where’s the X-Men?” Fricka better not hog cheese ‘um.

“It’s hidden against my back. Don’t worry. I’ll slip it underneath the cushion in the couch when she’s not looking. Then, if she catches us, we can make like it’s the same one the last time she busted us. She’s not going to know the difference.” I give Jojo credit – bugga is slick.

We wen’ start for walk toward the second row of apartments where Aunty Toni wen’ live, but then I wen’ get one funny feeling – one notion, I think Mom called this kine – and I wen’ stop short to catch one deep breath. My folks guarantee would get all nuts if they found out: Dad would give me lickins and Mom would be disappointed, which was way worse than getting lickins. I felt one calm come over me, like someone wen’ paint me with it. I wen’ swing around and book it back to the opposite direction.

Jojo was almost around the corner already, but I figure no use call him ‘cause he no could stop any way – he had to keep walking bent and awkward kine so the comic no bus’ out the top of his bebedees. Carrying the bread like was one football and baby same time – firm but gentle so the thing no dent – I wen’ book it over the hot asphalt; past Richard yelling at his radio; past the Mayor Wright boys under the tree smoking in the bus’ up car; across the street; past the horsey ride outside the door and into the A/C with the cold tile floor. I wen’ go straight to the first open line, and put the bread on the purveyor belt (how they make the thing move and stop? They like Jedis or something).

“Jess da bread, babe?” the lady wen’ ask. I was still in the zone so she wen’ catch me by surprise. She was missing couple teeth in funny kine places like Aunty Sala, but she wen’ seem real nice.

“Uh, yes please.”

“Okey dokey, sweetie. Dass eight-nine cents.”

I wen’ dig out the Jefferson real slow from my pocket. What? The pocket was empty! I was tripping out but had to make straight face kine, like how Mom make in public when my sister throw tantrum, or the one Dad make when the check wen’ bounce. Babooze! I told myself. I wen’ smile and exhale one big one. I wen’ reach in the other pocket and felt the soft folded bill. I wen’ unfold ‘um, gave ‘um one last snap for straighten ‘um out, then handed ‘um to the lady.

“Whoa! Honey, diss one two dollah bill! And one old kine one too! You no like use diss kine. Diss kine special. Wea you got diss from?”

“My dad. And Grandpa.”

Her eyes when get small kine, like she was connecting the dots. “You no moa nottin’ else?”

I wish. “No.” I thought about Grandpa, and Dad, and all the years the old bill wen’ spend in their pockets. I knew right then though that they both would approve of me using ‘um. “‘Ta ‘ualelei, honor moa important den a silly bill” I could here my Grandpa saying in his Samoan accent.

The lady wen’ look at the bill, then at me, then at the bill, then over her shoulder. “Hea, babe. Take um back. Yo’ Grandpa dem nevah meant fo’ diss ting end up in one supahmahket registah.” She wen pull my arm up with her eyes, like one tractor beam, and quickly push the bill back in my hand. “Happy Eastah!” she wen cackle, and shoo me and the crumpled loaf away. I was kind of in one trance, but I could tell my feet knew what for do because they was taking me right out the door. When I wen’ turn back for shout “mahalo,” I seen her reach underneath the counter and shuffle around. Then I wen’ see her quickly straighten up, look around, then open the register and put two bills inside. She wen’ see me standing there all speechless, gave me one wink, and when mouth “Happy Eastah!” silent kine. My legs wen’ again take over and wen’ autopilot me out the door.

Could smell the Virginia Slims from the sidewalk. Dottie Girl was on the top step painting her nails. She was talking fast kine into the phone that was pinched between her cheek and shoulder. The cigarette was flapping up and down quick kine, then wen’ stop, like one menehune wen’ just use um as one diving board. She wen’ squint at me through the smoke all lurchy kine, same as the guy Igor who wen’ help make Franklinshtein. My heart was full-on whoomping inside my ears so I never here what she wen’ say. I wen’ sign language her that I had for go shishi, and ran in the house. Jojo was on the couch with one sneaky smile. I wen’ point to the TV and mime to him “Change ‘um to Professor Fun; I gotta make like I goin shishi.” Dottie Girl, she get unreal Cat Woman senses, so cannot even whisper around her, she going hear.

I wen' shut the bathroom door and wen' fill the water cup. I wen pour um inside the toilet slow, then fast, then slow, moving um around little bit so the splash volume change for make um sound real. Then I wen' take the last little bit water and pour-stop-pour-stop for make drip action. I should get one Grammy Award for this acting job I thought. I wen' wash hands (Aunty Toni said no flush if you only went number one – waste water) and I could here Jojo crank up the volume.

It was the best sound I heard all day: Blake Miyake's voice on Professor Fun's show yelling "POW POW! POW POW POW!"

Sucking Blake – he never bulai after all.

Wanda

The *thung* of the stop bell roused him. Somewhere between Mo'oheau and Koko Head Ave, Patrick had dozed off. He wiped off the drool from his left hand roughly on his leg and rolled his left shoulder to his cheek to catch the remaining sweat, wincing as the bandage on his thumb scraped his knee. He wondered who had futilely pulled the gray signal cord hanging limp above the windows. This was the final stop on the route before heading back 'ewa, and it irked him that the rider didn't know this, but he remembered the talk on Acceptance he half-heard in chapel that morning and shifted his eyes to the Icee machine in the window of the crack seed store across the street.

The school year had just started, so his Servco Toyota sport bag was practically empty as he flipped it up off the adjacent seat with his index finger and stood. The red-black shiny plastic outer shell made him fist pump when he first saw it at the baseball jamboree because it matched his school colors.

With the engine directly beneath it, the back row was the hottest seat on the bus. But it was also the coolest. It was unwritten code that whoever sat in the back corners was in the power spots. Propping one foot on the armrest of the side-facing row in front of it completed the look. He always waited for the later bus because the earlier one had all the public-school housing kids on it and he couldn't contend with those bulls.

The stop at the bottom of Koko Head Ave. left the bus resting on a downward incline, so each step checked his momentum as his bare feet flapped on the runnels of the dusty aisle. Since the bus had emptied out, he passed on the exiting through the back door with its fickle hydraulics and

headed to the more reliable front exit. The uneven pressure of the hydraulic push bars had caught him once, pinching him half in and half out of the bus as it was about to move. Whether it was the trauma of nearly losing a limb or the shame of the public-school housing kids laughing at him, he did not know, but he avoided that exit when he could.

He ducked behind the driver, who stood winding the route sign scroll with one hand and peeling his polyester slacks out of his butt crack with the other. He could hear the heavy-set driver softly huffing under the whirring of the scroll as he hopped onto the sidewalk. Glancing up, Patrick was silently rooting for the driver to arrive at “3 - NAVY: Main Gate” so the poor guy could catch a breath. As “2 - School St.” rolled up and over like a number on the *Price is Right* wheel, he turned his attention to beating the crosswalk signal before it stopped blinking “Don’t Walk.”

Crack seed always made him sneeze. He stalled expectantly at the door to let one off before entering the corner shop. He had always thought the lemon peel dust was the culprit. The throbbing in his left hand surged as he pulled the creaky glass door open, reminding him not to get any li hing powder in his cut. The makeshift bandage he hid under the sleeve of his red and yellow Hawaii Islanders windbreaker had stopped working before lunch, and the slice Pocho gave him two nights prior was slow to scab. He quickly lunged his shoulder into the door to hold it open as an old Chinese lady and her little grandson scooted out, almond cookie crumbs tumbling off his chin as the little boy incoherently mumble-sang a vaguely familiar tune.

Inside, glass jars the size of rice cookers were slotted rim to rim on three levels of shelves, rising knee- to waist-high and running along the worn walls of the cramped corner store. Each jar held sweet-sour delights, including dried plums in a dozen different forms – dusted with li hing

chalk, ume plums soaked in sweet li hing syrup, seedless, shredded, candied. There were jars of green sweet crispy plums, dried cherries, dried mango, dried banana chips, dehydrated lemon peel – a hundred jars in all. An old school white scale shaped like an upside-down pizza slice who's gauge ran along the top crust was snuggled in among the seed containers. A peg board on the walls above the jars hung packaged snacks from the mainland, including nine different kinds of beef jerky, but no one ever bought them. The main draws were the endless li hing combinations and the Icee machine with the poster of the polar bear mascot in a red turtle neck surfing on a block of ice.

As he left the store, the back corners of his tongues were already buzzing with anticipation of the tart seeds harmonizing with the saliva on the inside of his cheek. The cold from the Icee he clutched began to burn his good hand. Pinching the bus transfer slip firmly in his pursed lips, he lurched to the bus stop for the #1 and #56 bus lines and collapsed on the open bench tagged with Mean Streak and Sharpies. Rookies and wannabes used white out, which repulsed him. Even crimes have codes.

He hopped off the #1 by A'ala and trotted through the concrete maze of two story walk-ups. Patrick squeezed into a game of jacks his cousins were playing on the stairs. It was almost 4:30, so Dottie Girl called down from the lānai just as he rattled the broken screen door open and reminded the cousins to get going. Patrick and Jojo didn't want to chance missing the beginning of Rat Patrol, so they bounced up and headed to the parking lot. It was just as well, because their cousins Teri and Rosie were wiping them out, as they usually do. It made sense; the girls played every day on the stairs – with tricks like “off the walls” – while the boys played Star Wars and Chase Master. Things usually evened out after dinner when the boys pounded them in paper football

(Scotty Koga had shown Patrick in math class how to make the triangle super tight to get optimal trajectory, so when Rosie made the field goal extra high with her long fingers, the boys still had a chance to score).

Uncle Mo's unreliable Datsun Stanza squatted like a weed in the unit's only assigned stall. Aunty's Mercury Zephyr had not worked since spring break, so they stashed it in a neighboring parking spot, assigned to Mr. Lim. Every morning that summer Patrick and Jojo had to push the jalopy Zephyr from Mr. Lim's spot to a visitors' stall, then roll it back in the afternoon once he left to work his swing/graveyard double shift (literally: he was overnight security at Island Memorial Cemetery, where he had quite a reputation for catching private school kids trying to ice block the virgin hills of yet-to-be-sold plots). Aunty surmised that she could use visitors' parking during the day, and her downstairs neighbor Mr. Lim's spot at night. Mr. Lim caught the boys and the Zephyr in his parking space once – they had overslept and took a while to find the key – but they told him they were just playing Starsky & Hutch and had let the Zephyr roll into his stall. When he complained up to Aunty from his ground floor entrance, she scolded him from her lānai above: “Uh? You frickin pake, shut yo mouf befoa I shove da majong up yo’ ass! Se ai kae!” When Mr. Lim couldn't (or wouldn't) muster a formidable enough reply, he muttered Cantonese curse words and shuffled inside. He knew better than to say anything to make Aunty come downstairs. He knew – the whole complex knew – that she would lick him and his whole family living underneath her, which consisted of seemingly innumerable extended relatives, none of whom spoke English.

She had grown up tough in Samoa before moving to Hawai'i for high school. Living in Kapahulu, she quickly became the bull of Crane Park. She used to eat free at Alex Drive-In because she would handle any young punks trying to make trouble to the owner. On an extended return home to Samoa after graduating from Sacred Hearts, she was even lead bouncer at a bar in Tafuna. Mr. Lim had seen her rough up Uncle Mo more than once – one time banging his head on the

railing like it was a turnbuckle and she was Farmer Boy Ipo – then just turn around and smile, sauntering inside to make sure all the kids had enough to eat and that someone had started hanging the laundry.

The color of the Zephyr had long ceased to be its original sterling and now had taken to more closely resembling bondo. Combined with sporadic duct tape patches, the old car looked like a bum who tried to shave and missed a bunch of spots. Aunty called the growing splotches of rust “copper accents.” The inside was ketchup red – not a darker red, like Heinz; more of a brighter red, like Hunt’s. When they were younger, Patrick would run his hands across the smooth bumps of the car seats and imagine they were the sides of a whale’s mouth, and he was Jonah from the stories he heard in Sunday school.

Since Patrick had beaten Jojo in a cards – it was a Speed tournament this time – he had to push the car for a week while Patrick got to steer (Jojo had slower hands and caught a raw deal when, holding a king, the middle card flipped 5 and Patrick had a 6-7-8). Each time, the boys made like they were in Hawaii 5-0 or Magnum P.I., so the days it was Patrick’s turn to steer he never made like he was McGarrett or Danno, even though that’s who he looked like most. He always played Kono, Duke Lukela or Ben Kokua, believing he had to root for those guys because “no more too many brown people on TV,” his dad had said. He especially liked Ben Kokua, because that was Al Harrington, and he was told that Al (along with, apparently, every other famous Polynesian) was their relative. Sometimes, to be fair to his haole side, Patrick made like he was Bo cruising in The General. He’d slide over the hood, jump in through the window, and make like Daisy was inside – and that they were only calabash cousins.

To buy time, Patrick lied to Jojo that Dottie Girl was calling him back, then trotted to the Zephyr to have first crack in the hunt for loose change. He started with the ashtray, but there were only pennies, so he went to his reliable spot: back seat floor, underneath the front seats. He curled

his head to the floor and saw a number of silver coins littering the faded interior carpet. A potato bug crawled out from an empty Virginia Slims box. It headed for the ridges of the plastic foot mat stained a candy bar brown. The bug climbed up and down each little ridge, making its way to the middle of the mat, looking like a monkeypod seed in a horizontal pachinko machine.

Patrick had just grabbed the last quarter and was about to start pinching dimes when he heard it: “Wanda! Wanda!” It wasn’t like Rocky yelling “Adrian!” It was an unnaturally high-pitched scream, like the pretty white girls in scary movies, except it was a guy. Patrick froze, then sank to floor and ended up face down, his body a perfect seesaw with the hump of the drive shaft as the fulcrum. He imagined himself like Mary Lou Retton on the uneven bars, trying to balance by pinching his ass cheeks to make his body taut. “Wanda! I love you! Wanda!” Whoever Wanda is, Patrick thought, sounds like she goin’ get it. Fighting hard to ignore the growing pain in his nuts, Patrick closed his eyes. He didn’t even want to move, thinking that if he did, the car might move too, and he didn’t want the guy to think he was Wanda. “Wandaaa! I know you love me! Come down awreddy! Wanda!” Patrick’s mind bounced between trying to make sense of the scene – No way dis chick is stupid enough for talk to him – and safety – gua-ran-tee Auntie would pound dis guy out if she wasn’t working overtime as operator at Hawaiian Tel right now.

To calm the building dizziness, he opened his eyes and refocused in time to glimpse the potato bug retreating underneath the mat, and Patrick wished he could join it. His nose was just inches from the mat, and he was still spread over the hump like Bart Connor on the pommel horse. The afternoon sun continued to bake the old car. Sweat now ran off the end of his nose, the drops starting to fill one of the grooves in the mat. No longer able to handle the burning in his crushed nuts, he made his move. In one smooth motion, he did a reverse sit up, shifted until his butt was even with the back seat, and quickly slid on, a move he had learned in Sunday mass so the pews wouldn’t creak.

As Patrick popped up, the guy was directly in front of the car. All Patrick could see was from the guy's waist up to his mouth. His teeth were a mess. It looked like he had haphazardly glued pieces of corn under his lips. His neck looked as if he had riddled it with staples, then ripped them all out. Patrick had never seen anything like this guy. His chest and stomach looked like one big piece of beef jerky – all dark brown and twisted, with lines running everywhere. Patrick was snapped out of his trance when the guy bent down and slammed the hood with his bony hand. That's when Patrick saw them. The eyes. He would never forget those eyes. They looked like tiny over easy eggs with the yoke broken, except the yoke was a Tabasco red, like how Uncle Mo ate his eggs with his steamed ulu and Vienna sausage straight from the can, juice and all.

“Wotchu lookin’ at, pahnk, hah?” He didn’t know if it was supposed to be a rhetorical question, so Patrick just stared blankly back at him, the same stare kids gave moms when asked why they never finished their homework. The guy’s voice was high and rattling, like he was talking through a kazoo. “Hah?” He was lurking to the side now, toward the front passenger door, slow and crouching like a pool shark lining up the next shot. The hot vinyl seat was melting into Patrick’s thighs, and he envisioned a fruit roll-up melting onto its wax wrapper when he’d forget it in his lunch box. The coins he had been clutching were now burning his hand, as if he were holding charcoals from the hibachi after Uncle Boogie already blew off the gray dust and made them orange. Now I wish Wanda was stupid enough to talk to this crazy bastard. Patrick jumped over to the left side to get out, but forgot that that door didn’t open. He was frantic.

The first slipper missed long, banging off the roof of the Ford Pinto in the next stall. The second one nailed the guy right in the ear. These weren’t the cheap, flimsy kind from Long’s; these were the thick, heavy kind with the triple layer rainbow on the side. The pool shark now turned into an antelope who just found out the cheetahs had shown up to the watering hole. He straightened up with a confused look – mouth open crookedly, head cocked to the side, eyes big. The Tabasco eggs

were gone, replaced by a filmy white, like how Uncle Mo's plate looked when he finished eating. When the cordless phone cracked his nose, the batteries smacked the window – tack! tack! – and the beef jerky antelope with the stapled skin and corn teeth panicked and took off across the lot, plunging through the mock orange hedge by A'ala Park and out of sight.

Patrick didn't feel anything from Dottie Girl yanking him out the backseat. He didn't feel his sticky fruit roll-up thighs nor the charcoal coins in his hand. The only two things he could sense was how thirsty he was and how strong Dottie Girl felt – like a paper tree hugging him, her skin firm but smooth against his face.

The shadows B building threw on the sidewalk made his bare feet happy. Jojo walked behind them facing backwards, on the lookout with Dottie's slippers cocked in each hand and the busted phone clacking in his pocket. She helped him up the stairs. Patrick felt like he was walking up an escalator headed down, thinking back to his brother chasing him up escalators at Liberty House after Patrick ambushed him in the women's department with double-fisted perfume squirts to the ears. He felt Dottie's hanabada pooling in his hair, but he didn't bother moving his head. She never said one word the whole walk back to the apartment, but he could hear Dottie Girl's unsteady breathing, sucking in both lips then spitting them out, like she was trying to inhale a shifting wind. With the Zephyr still parked in his stall, Mr. Lim would be sucking wind when he got home, too.

Custard

Damn. Mary's birthday today. I got nothing. Ab, guess I'll do her chores for the week Patrick shrugged as he walked home from practice. *Just like last year.* He felt ashamed for his lack of mindfulness for his baby sister. She was an angel. He had no excuse. For her fourth birthday, he had carved four honu out of mango wood and had hung them from an old wooden coat hanger. He had painted the sea turtles Board of Water Supply green. "Twer-dohs wub gween!" she had squealed. They had hung from a nail on the wall near the bathroom in the narrow hallway. Mary had named each one – Shelly, Splashy, Slow Poke and Jake – saying good morning and good night to them religiously.

Patrick smiled briefly at the memory before guilt settled back in. His worn Keds took turns kicking a dried monkeypod up the sidewalk, its seeds rattling inside as it finally skittered off the path. That type of effort was not typical of him; none of the other siblings received gifts from him. He loved and cared for his siblings deeply yet found comfort in the detachment that came with being the eldest male, and he surrendered to the ease of it.

But Mary was different. Her flu scare at three, trachoma at five, getting clipped a year later by the Lincoln Capri on Lincoln Ave. – each challenged his resolve. Not being able to protect her was bad enough without also forgetting her birthday, which her short life had shown was not a guarantee. He looked up, lips pursed, took a deep breath and exhaled quickly before crossing Kaimukī Avenue, regret dragging behind him.

The sun had not yet dropped below the canopy of massive banyans in Crane Park before the bookies and gamblers started to arrive. It was Thursday night, and Alex Drive-In was the place to be (Chunky's, which was across the street from the stadium, was the spot on game days). They came to

throw around malts and burgers to the high school players who might have a nugget that could give them an edge in the weekend games. The local car hop had a distinctive pink and seafoam green neon-piped sign that blinked “Alex’s” in script above the corner of the lot, and it rotated lazily on its axis throughout the night, matching the rhythms of the traffic below. It anchored the mauka end of Kapahulu Ave., which ended a mile or so down the road at the beach.

Inside, high schoolers postured and chatted and laughed a little too loudly. They pecked at fries and looked everywhere else but at the person talking them. Bobby Darin blared from the jukebox. The girls in the nearest booth giggled while the boys at the counter silently wished they were Bobby Darin so they could make girls in a booth giggle. Patrick grabbed a stool at the bend in the counter near the door opposite the jukebox, propped himself up on the counter over both his thick brown forearms, and half-listened to his teammate Winston Mau lie about a girl. His thick eyebrows framed safe cognac-brown eyes, and his flared nostrils saddled a squashed Polynesian nose. He was handsome enough – like how a base hit isn’t a homerun but nonetheless has value but relied on his charisma more than his looks to carry him. The star center and linebacker could be found here often after practice, killing an hour before walking two blocks home to the two bedroom on 2nd Ave. The music and chatter were a welcome respite from home, where his very Catholic folks and six younger siblings got by. Mostly, he hung out for a burger or fries dropped his way by friends who couldn’t (or wouldn’t) finish. He and they both knew he tried not to eat at home so there was more for his younger brothers and sisters, their friends, the revolving door of relatives, or anyone else from the neighborhood who dropped in. In this he felt no shame, remembering one of his father’s sayings: “You shame, you starve.”

One of his younger brothers, Raymond, hopped out from the kitchen with his hands behind his back, untying his apron. Patrick flinched at the image, knowing Raymond was the most likely of

the brothers to end up in that pose as his head is pushed down to avoid the roof of the squad car.

Raymond washed dishes here most afternoons. It was the only job he'd been able to keep for more than a month. He bounced from booth to booth cracking jokes and stealing fries. He danced up the aisle toward Patrick wearing a smug look.

"What, forgot again, uh?" he snickered, stopping a stool away. Over the years Raymond had learned the reach of his brother's left jab and knew to keep his distance. "No worry, I never get her nuttin' too. But whoa, nuttin' from the big boss braddah numbah one?" Raymond tsk'd. "I t'ink so Mary might cry."

Patrick felt the embarrassment well up, only to be tamped back down by pride. His eyes leveled solidly toward Raymond. "I tell you one thing I won't forget: this right here." Patrick's index finger wagged back and forth between the two of them. Raymond leaned back, wiggling his fingers and feigning fear, but as soon as Patrick looked away his smirk faded and he sidestepped his way around his brother and out the door, staying clear of the right hand he knew too well. "Eh, Taks" Raymond called over his shoulder as he held the door open for a short Japanese man who hobbled in. Taks shot two quick nods upward, squinting at Raymond through his cigarette smoke, stepped in and approached Patrick.

"Eh, Pachrick, how you?" Taks greeted him with a friendly fake punch to the ribs. "You hungry? Tirsty?" Taks leaned over the counter, "Myrtle, honey! Get dis boy one freeze. T'ank you sweethaht." Milton "Taks" Takayama was a well-known character around town. A WWII veteran and member of the famous 442nd Airborne, he had worked his way back home from the war after some years running numbers in Philadelphia. He walked with a pronounced limp – German bullet to the hip – giving him an authoritative gait that didn't fit his slim frame. He got a lot of

mileage out of the battle wound, jabbing himself hard in the chest with two crooked fingers and proclaiming at the first chance he got, “Dose krauts no moa nottin’ on dis musubi!”

“Eh, Taks” Patrick said with nervous courtesy.

“Eh, so what, how’s da Komida boy doing?” Did Russell Komida just get dumped by that crazy pake girl whose father ran the mom-n-pop on Harding Ave.? Was Bobby Mahoe hobbling after practice? Was Charlie Ah Sam’s drunk dad at it again? The questions wound through the place like Cokes through swirly straws. Some angles were easy enough to pick up without insider help: if the waves were up, Sonny Malama’s legs would be dead; if it was the end of the month, the Lum brothers would be exhausted from hauling and stacking crates at their grandpa’s nursery. Games in September meant Renny Tabayan and the Gomes boys would be wrecked from picking mango all week. These more nuanced pieces of gossip had to be gathered the old fashioned way – a hearty slap on the back, an orange freeze or chocolate malted slid down the counter, a couple bucks slipped into pockets. Mr. Lee, the owner, was a notorious gambler, his fingers in almost every sporting event in town. The old saying was Alex’s “is where odds are made, bets are laid, and debts are paid.” Patrick and the other boys didn’t much care about the blurry ethics of it all – free food and adoration went a long way in blunting a high school kid’s moral axe.

“Uh, yeah, um, he’s doing good” Patrick replied. How the hell am I supposed to know how Russ is doing? he thought. It’s not like us guys sit around and talk about our feelings. But he knew the game and liked the perks, and by now he knew how to appear to be giving guys inside info while not really saying anything.

“So what, he good den? Okay, okay, dass wot I t’ought.” Guys like Taks were constantly reaffirming whatever rationalizations they had for their bets, so they’d often take whatever a kid said

and rearrange it in their heads to match their hopes for the outcome. Taks laughed again: “I guess dass what you get for t’inking wit’ da boto instead of da brain!” They both cracked up. Though he didn’t hold Taks and the others in high regard, he did respect their rawness, and he knew one-liners like that from a classic like Taks would stand the test of time.

After declining multiple offerings of a bite to eat from Mr. Pang, his teammate Glenn’s dad, Patrick gathered himself to leave. He made sure to say goodbye to Myrtle without getting in her way, remembering to thank her for helping with his sister Mary’s communion the week prior.

“Aw, honey, of course. Anyt’ing fo’ you guys. You give mama my love and we’ll see you at mass.” She shot a furtive glance over her shoulder, slouched quickly, then pulled out a bakery-pink pie box from under the counter. The edges had started to lose their crispness, but the box was firm enough to slip across the counter, along with a brown bag. “Fo’ good luck tomorrow” she mouthed with a wink, not missing a beat in clacking her gum. Myrtle worked the morning shift across the street at the bakery, so every so often she would send Patrick or one of the siblings home with something for their folks.

“Oh, nah, no need. Thank you. But, oh” Patrick stammered, but Myrtle was already halfway down the counter, clutching silverware in one hand and a coffee pot in the other. He quickly slid the box between his Pee Chee folder and the Latin book he carried around for show. With a couple coughs into his sleeve to avoid eye contact with anyone else, he grabbed the brown bag and stepped off the red-cushioned stool and into the bustling lot.

Once across the street, he opened the brown bag – ham and fried egg sandwich, white bread, still warm. No doubt Mr. Pang had bought it and had Myrtle give it to him. The first half of the sandwich, sliced diagonally, went down in two bites. He rolled the bag closed, saving the other half in case Mary or one of his brothers was still hungry. After clearing the last moist chunks of

bread from back corners of his mouth with his tongue, he shook his head, then sheepishly unrolled the bag and inhaled the rest of the sandwich. It was selfish, he knew, but he reasoned away the guilt by telling himself Mr. Pang meant it for good luck the next night, and he didn't want to mess with a Chinese man and his superstition. Then he pinched back the bakery box cover to see what Myrtle had packed. Even in the half-light of dusk he could make out the delicious brown blotches of an overcooked custard pie. His favorite. As he salivated and resisted jamming a couple fingers in for a taste, his big-family survival instincts kicked in. How am I going to sneak this by everybody? Should I just eat the whole thing now? His march slowed as he approached the huge mango tree that dwarfed the Ah Sing's yard. That's the spot to do it he urged himself. But his feet kept moving – past the Aiwohis and the dilapidated '41 Ford out front; past the Souzas and their permanently hanging laundry; past Mr. Muraoka cleaning fish on his front porch – and placed him at his own front steps.

It was rare to see their front lānai empty, let alone at nightfall, yet there he stood alone with the limp, greasy pie box in hand. The orange freeze had initially checked his appetite, but now his hunger surged. The ham and fried egg had not even registered. Patrick closed his eyes and began to guess exactly what he would see upon entering. Daddy would be either reading the paper or mumbling over rosary beads, indifferent either way. Francis and Raymond would be sweeping the parlor and preparing the fala mats for our bed. Lina and Leina would be helping Mama sand kukui nuts for lei she'd sell in Waikīkī that week. Mary would be busy over the sink, and Rose would be taking too long in the bathroom. He smiled and shook his head, as if accepting this fate, and plodded up the steps with his hands full, easily pushing open the door with his hip. The knob hadn't turned in years, which didn't matter, because the house was never locked.

He was glad to see Mary was where he had predicted. His mother looked up from her shells. “Eh, you come home now only?” He had long gotten used to his folks’ broken English, the result of priests’ English-only orders a decade earlier, and was glad for it – a scolding in Samoan lasted a lot longer. “And Mary birfday too, uh?” None of this registered with his dad, who didn’t bother to look up over the front page. Francis and Raymond shot “good for you” glances at him while he wasn’t looking, and each sister gave her version of a halfhearted hello.

“Sorry, Mama,” he apologized as he hopscotched his way through the tiny, crowded house and into the kitchen. Mary wheeled around just in time to catch him with a suds ball right on his nose. “I guess I should have left the dishes for you, since I figured, you know...my birthday” she teased.

“Not this year, sis. Keep scrubbing.” He swiped at the fading bubbles gathered on his nose and peeled back the top of the pie box. “Thought you might like this instead.”

“Brother! Yes! My favorite!” Her shriek made everyone but their dad crane their necks toward the kitchen.

“Only for you – no taste tests” Patrick warned, pointing at both brothers, who shrugged at each other, helpless under their big brother’s mandate.

“Love you, Brother! You’re the best,” wrapping her arms around his waist and squeezing her ear into his muscular chest. Patrick turned his broad back to the living room to hide the exchange from the others. He looked out the window over the sink and saw Mrs. Chow clicking on a lamp in her parlor. The lilikoi on her fence had begun to flower.

Mary pulled back for a moment and looked up at him. She was beaming. Another memory he thought. She again hugged him deeply, squeezing the guilt right out of him, then set to cutting out a healthy piece for their father.

Mrs. St. Sure

We sat cross-legged in three crooked rows and, aside from occasionally alternating between butt cheeks, we were still and quiet. The faded blue shag carpet, still trampled from the bigger second graders we just replaced, clung to our sweaty legs like cotton candy on eager tongues. The midday heat made us uneasy. Comingled with pungent old lady perfume, it hung loosely on our shoulders like an over-sized shawl. Our only relief came from intermittent trade winds sifting through the smeared louvers along the mauka wall. Mt. Lē‘ahi, its brown cheeks dotted with green from a wetter than average winter, stared knowingly down its nose at us over Ala Wai golf course.

“Chil’ren, y’all ready to go on anotha’...adventure?” Mrs. St. Sure asked sweetly, peering over her bifocals, which were attached to what looked like a chain of Rosary beads dangling in front of her oversized ears. We replied in a cacophony of yeses. Of course we were. Besides recess, for many of us, this was our favorite part of the day. It was a kind of escape – the chance to swim in her goopy Alabama drawl while it floated us through tales of turtles and hares and trains that thought they could. Her voice drenched us in thick, blooming colors of sound. Even her name brought us peace.

“I’m so glad to hear it. I have a question for y’all: Y’all like worms?” As expected, a collective “Eww” arose from the group, except from Keoni Uchida, the class contrarian. He exclaimed “I think they’re cool!”

Mrs. St. Sure’s paper-white filaments of hair bounced lightly as she chuckled. “Oh, Keoni” she smiled (mispronouncing it KeeyOH-nee), “aren’t you my curious little scientist. Now,” pausing to let the smattering of giggles die down, which allowed us to marinate in her syrupy Southern accent, “what would y’all do if y’all had to...eat one?” The ewws got louder. “Well then. Let’s all

settle in and join our little friend Billy on a most peculiar endeavor.” None of knew what those last two words meant, but how she dragged them out and didn’t bother pronouncing the “r” in either word made us feel like we were on the verge of something big.

She gently shifted a crease out of her knee-length mu‘umu‘u and adjusted her wide rear end in the squeaky office chair that served as her pulpit. On muggy days like this, when her flowery cassock would grab and stick in awkward places, she would take a moment to sort these things out. She looked like an aging alto, moments before ambling on stage for one last performance, tugging on her decades-old dress that no longer fit. She was a real-life saint to us, a regal specimen whose taut posture defied her heavy frame. The crackle of the cellophane cover as she opened the book was one of my favorite sounds. There was comfort and excitement in it, an expectation in its announcement that a story was about to begin. Whenever I heard it I knew I was safe, and that I was loved.

“How to Eat Fried Worms, by Thomas Rockwell” she proclaimed, our eyes briefly drawn to the loose vibration of her jowls. The book rested sturdily in her pudgy left hand, her middle three fingers hidden while her thumb and pinky were splayed like a shaka. Splotches of age spots turned her arms into loaves of multi-grain bread. She gave a quick, light lick to her index finger, plump and shiny and firm as an uncooked breakfast sausage, before crisply snapping the title page with a thwip.

In our time with her, she never failed to repeat an anecdote about her visit to the Holy Land. My favorites were the ones about Galilee. I didn’t care so much for the story as much as the name. Galilee. I prayed she would say it fifty times. Galilee. A more beautiful combination of letters and sounds had never been spoken. Galilee. What a magical word it was. And though Blake Mukai

daydreamed and poked flecks of sand from his toes, and Joseph Chow lazily picked his nose, and Alik Downey dozed off with his chin in his hand, we all rolled down the stream of Mrs. St. Sure's voice together. When our time with her was up, after we'd groaned and begged for one more story, we jostled for last position in the exit line so we could get the longest hug while she reminded us all "how much God loves y'all so."

As the elementary years rolled on, Mrs. St. Sure remained a constant in our lives. Book fairs were seasonal highlights, and she made each one feel like the grandest event in the world. For weeks prior I combed through order forms for favorite authors and exciting new titles. Anything by Beverly Cleary shot straight to the top of the list. *Ramona*, *Ribsy*, *Henry Huggins*, *Ralph from The Mouse and the Motorcycle* – I grew up with them. They were my companions. Of course, I had to work out my pitch to my folks about how going over budget at a book fair was completely justified, pointing out that I did all my chores and never asked for Roos shoes or a Members Only jacket – partly because I knew we couldn't afford them, and partly because I thought they looked ridiculous. The biggest challenge I faced was beating my older brother to the car ashtray to scoop change to fund my fix.

Adolescence is a strange beast. Early on, I kept my tattered copy of *The Outsiders* or *On a Pale Horse* hidden when entering the locker room before intermediate football practice. I would quickly slide the contraband underneath my school folder – a classic eight-pouch masterpiece made from Pee-Chee folders and electric tape. When my stash was discovered, the collective response from the guys was "That's not for class? You're reading a book...for fun?" *Sports Illustrated*, surfing mags, car mags, and the occasional *Penthouse* were what constituted our locker room

library, and since many of us took our cues from older alpha dogs, the books would have to be kept out of sight to avoid further ridicule. Clearly, fiction reading did not fit into the teen male construct (and clearly, this is how many of us handled our frothing insecurity); however, if you eventually stepped up and owned your “thing,” there was an odd, indirect, almost chivalric respect floated your way by the group. It was as if, by carving out your identity, you struck a primal chord; that, by staking claim to something – anything – you were following a most sacred tenet of manhood. Pissing on your fire hydrant bought you time.

It did not take long, then, for me to again recognize how reading was viewed favorably by other powerful influences in my life – parents, teachers, and most of all, girls. With my self-esteem invigorated and confidence fortified, I quickly reaped the benefits. Reading awarded me a badge of honor in the locker room, the benefit of the doubt in the classroom, and (a couple years later) an opportunity or two in the bedroom. Though my love of reading was not without consequence – more than one algebra assignment was blown off in order to find out what ghoulish obstacle awaited Bilbo next – stories nourished me in ways solving for x never could.

Just as a callus gains its strength from repeated friction, love often endures because it is continually tested. Over the years, I’ve had my trysts with Atari and Tecmo Bowl, Cheers and Eddie Murphy specials, but reading remained my first love. These media were each their own manifestations of the smoking hot chick who is crazy – fulfilling my every desire one instant, turning into a jealous, raving psycho the next. They were the drugs that sucked me in, hawked me out, and kept me coming back for more.

To compound my infidelity, I came of age just as the NBA and NFL began their meteoric rise in popularity. Now I had to contend with multiple smoking hot chicks, each vying for my

attention. In college, fall Sundays were shot. SportsCenter on repeat owned my nights. I succumbed to the pressure, inundated with stimuli I no longer had the will to resist. But all the while, reading was never far from my mind. She kept the light on for me; remained steadfast and vigilant despite my neglect; stayed loyal and faithful through all my dalliances. And as I've come crawling back over the last two decades, wracked with guilt, she has not judged me, but has welcomed me back with open pages.

For today's young men, the group of smoking hot chicks has grown into a sorority. I watch my fifteen-year-old nephew struggle with this juggling act. The pervasive access to media via smartphones, iPads and laptops has launched a constant bombardment on his senses – these symbolic smoking hot chicks now call, tweet, toggle, text, swipe, like and post him into submission. I wouldn't have had a chance.

Looking back on those warm afternoons with Mrs. St. Sure, I realize the urgency to expose my two young sons to that same wondrous world of Story. I want to teach them that reading can be a vital force in their lives – that no matter how far they stray from her, she will never leave them. In reading, my two young sons will hear that same crackle of cellophane and know that they are safe, and that they are loved.

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